

WANDERLUST

a poetry collection

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A thesis submitted to
the University of Canterbury
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
in Creative Writing.

Christchurch, New Zealand

March 2009

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Give Me the Beat Boys: Beat Literature and Its Influence on *Wanderlust*

My best friend Paul once read aloud from *On the Road* for six continuous hours as we road-tripped from Los Angeles to San Francisco in the autumn of 2003. On our arrival, we grabbed the book and scurried around to the Haight, the Castro, and City Lights Books in North Beach. We knew we were a cliché, not to mention half a century too late. But, alone in our respective Midwestern towns, we'd both been daydreaming about this pilgrimage for years, and the risk of looking like unhip tourists was not enough to temper our enthusiasm. In the intervening years I have cast a more critical eye on the literature and the personalities of the Beat movement. But that weekend remains with me, as does the association I made then between the Beats and the newfound freedom of being in California. The two are still entangled in my mind. And so, a consideration of *Wanderlust*, a collection full of cars and planes and westward movement, must begin with a brief history of Beat poetry, with particular emphasis on those California migrants Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg.

A Beat Introduction

Beat poetry exists blurrily within the larger category of Beat literature, which is itself intertwined with the "Beat Generation," a term John Clellon Holmes borrowed from Jack Kerouac for a 1952 *New York Times Magazine* article describing the increasingly visible population of disaffected post-war youth. With this public introduction, the Beat label connoted juvenile delinquency and became further confused by media representations of do-nothing "beatniks," such as Maynard G Krebs in the late fifties. It is not surprising, therefore, that many Beat writers distanced themselves and their work from the label. Even Kerouac and William S. Burroughs, authors of two of the three most famous, continuously in-print Beat texts (*On the Road* and *Naked Lunch*, respectively, with Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" as the other), came to distance themselves from the morphing Beat categorization.

Then again, it was never a neat category to begin with. Beat literature ranges from spontaneous bop prosody to experimental cut-up/fold-in documents, from translations of early Eastern verse to essays on poetics, politics, religion, drugs, and the environment. It is "a wild pluralism that escapes simple taxonomy" (Meltzer 71). The backgrounds and beliefs of the writers are also strikingly diverse: ex-cons, ex-soldiers, Catholics, Jews, Buddhists, socialists, conservatives, West Coast mountain men, East Coast urban hipsters, Blacks, Whites, Native Americans, hermits, homosexuals. As Kerouac puts it, no two Beat writers were alike, "but we all had fun over wine anyway" (Interview 46). Often that was enough – more than shared philosophy or style, friendship was the usual ticket into this loose association of highly individual contemporaries. Beginning in the forties with the Columbia trio of Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs in New York, and the Reed College gang of Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Lew Welch in Portland, the two crowds snowballed, before finally meeting in the Bay Area in the mid-fifties (Meltzer 83). The major catalyst for this eventual merging of the two constellations was the famed Six Poets at Six Gallery reading, at which Ginsberg debuted "Howl," reading alongside his old friend Philip Lamantia, as well as Snyder, Whalen, and Michael McClure, all of whom he had met through a series of introductions not long before the event (Gifford and Lee 167).

Friendship between Beat writers, though volatile at times, proved crucial to their development: it constituted a major theme and source of Beat literature, evident through heartfelt and savage fictionalizations, dedications, and homages. It cross-pollinated diverse styles and influences, infusing jazz with Zen, Whitman with haiku. And, for Ginsberg's friends especially, it provided the critical leg-up into publishing success, as the young man's "intuitive understanding of how to promote himself and the other unpublished writers in his circle ultimately helped bring the Beats to public attention" (Johnson and Pinchbeck 393). Finally, friendship offered a model for one value the Beats had in common: the freedom to be honest, "to *write*, the same way that you are" (Ginsberg, Interview 11). They insisted "that one might write in

the same words and manner that one would use in talking to a friend," without censoring anything or employing heightened rhetoric (Creeley x). This conviction was the impetus for the Beats' various stylistic innovations and their inclusion of commonplace, intimate, and even controversial content.

A Heritage of Style

Stylistically, the Beats' influences were as varied as their work, in many cases beginning with surprisingly canonical literary fare. Ginsberg was the son of Louis Ginsberg, a successful poet, English teacher, and editorialist, whose iambic rhymes Allen imitated for years before casting off the lyric mode "as an anachronism in my own time" (Ginsberg, "Confrontation" 14). Kerouac, too, earnestly studied "Keats, Yeats, Shakespeare, Pascal, Tolstoy – the whole of the Western literary canon" as a young man, entertaining friends in later years with his readings and recitations from Shakespeare (Brinkley 110). When he came to craft his first novel, *The Town and the City*, "writing slowly with revisions and endless rehashing speculation," it was in the linear autobiographical, American *bildungsroman* form of Thomas Wolfe (Interview 5).

The Beat writers' more famous work, criticized as formless automatic typing in a "hopped-up and improvised tone," was equally rooted in literary tradition, albeit an unfashionable for at the time (Hollander 161). Fashionable then was the modernist aesthetic of T.S. Eliot, whose influence "grafted [onto] American writing" a formalism, conservatism, and classicism that was foreign to the tradition of personal, subjective, homegrown literature that preceded it (Holmes 5-6). Popular as it was, though, Eliot's work had its detractors. William Carlos Williams, who belonged to a specifically American wing of modernism, objected to Eliot's preference for classical and foreign allusions and sources, his disinclination to root his poetry "in the locality which should give it fruit" (Williams 174). In particular, he felt that "The Waste Land," Eliot's celebrated 1922 post-WWI epic, would set American poetry back twenty years (Holmes 5-6). When the various Beat enclaves began to form, right on schedule in the early

forties, they passed over Eliot, looking instead to the enthusiastically American writers of the 19th century – "the rolling combers of Melville, the bardic inclusiveness of Whitman, the October tang of Thoreau, the lapidary apothegms of Emerson" (Holmes 9). Of these celebrants of the local and the personal, Walt Whitman emerged as a key influence on the Beats, Ginsberg especially.

Writing a century before the Beat poets, Whitman crafted his American epic, *Leaves of Grass*, partially in response to Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1837 "American Scholar" address, in which the older poet called for an independent national literature, lamenting that "we have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe" (45). With this inspiration, Whitman took for his subject the panoramic American landscape and its everyday inhabitants. Though the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published anonymously, the poet's all-embracing depiction of his country was inextricable from his expansive and overlapping depictions of himself. This is most notable in the famed "Song of Myself," originally titled "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American," in which the speaker walks us through his America, presenting with equal reverence the prostitutes and patriarchs, shoemakers and Presidents, lunatics and deacons, and proclaiming that "of these one and all I weave the song of myself" (59-61). This celebration of the personal perspective and the common citizen (or even the pariah) in the midst of a sweeping portrait of a nation prefigures Beat works such as Ginsberg's *The Fall of America* and "Howl." The latter also shares with *Leaves of Grass* the frank approach to sexual matters, particularly between men, that earned both books allegations of obscenity.

Whitman also lent Ginsberg his long line, "a big, freakish, uncontrollable necessary prosaic goof," used by Whitman to achieve parallelism and balance within a catalog of equally important ideas (Ginsberg, "Notes for Howl" 416; Allen xvii). Ginsberg noted that the long line was a "break-through begun by Whitman but never carried forward" and seized on its power to provide a "base cyclical flow for the build up of a powerful rhythm" (Eberhart letter 154). He regarded the whole of *Howl and Other Poems* as a series of experiments with Whitman's long line, from Part III of "Howl," pyramidal in structure "with a graduated longer response to the fixed

base," to "The Sunflower Sutra," with its mounting rhythm but no repeated base (Ginsberg, "Notes for Howl" 416-417). The result of the experiment, Ginsberg wrote to a reporter, was that Whitman's long line freed "speech for emotional expression," a function valued by both poets (Eberhart letter 154).

Before Ginsberg struck upon Whitman's long line, he spent four years working with William Carlos Williams' variable foot "short line free form" (Ginsberg, Eberhart letter 153). Williams, who hailed from Ginsberg's Paterson, New Jersey hometown, not only wrote introductions to both *Empty Mirror* and *Howl*, but also gave advice on Ginsberg's earliest work. The younger poet credited Williams with steering him away from his father's fixed iambic rhymes with the terse commentary "In this mode perfection is basic" ("Confrontation" 11). In sending Williams an early draft of "Howl," Ginsberg expressed hope that his new work with the long line would "answer somewhat what you were looking for" (Williams letter 150). In addition to his direct influence on Ginsberg, Williams passed along to the Beats his insistence that poetry should tackle ideas through particulars and use plain language, including spoken vernacular and American rhythms of speech. Ginsberg notes that this appeal for intelligible common language represented a cyclical renewal of the Romantic poet William Wordsworth's entreaty to poets in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: "in order to excite rational sympathy, [the poet] must express himself as other men express themselves" (251). Many of the Beat poets took this still further, incorporating not just the American educated, middle-class vernacular, but also "the American workaday vernacular" and "the American musicalized vernacular" of jazz (Ball 241).

Of the Beat poets, Kerouac was perhaps the most ardent jazz fan, hanging around Black clubs in Harlem, listening to Charlie Parker and Lester Young improvise saxophone solos. What intrigued him most was the sense of freedom associated with improvisation, which he describes as "the outburst of passionate musicians, who pour all of their energy into their instruments" (qtd. in Swenson 29). Kerouac fashioned his own poetry after the jazz solo, treating his sentences as "breath separations of the mind" and confining each poem, or "chorus," to a single

notebook page, in imitation of the musician who has to get out "his statement within a certain number of bars" (Interview 10, 26). The sound of jazz also influenced Kerouac, especially in his spontaneous prose, which in turn influenced Ginsberg's poetry. Ginsberg notes that "bebop was originally modeled on people talking to each other through their horns, syncopations of street speech," so for the Beats to transcribe jazz back into words completed the circle: "Speech went into horn-breath and came back to cadence-sentences" (Alfonso 257). Though Ginsberg admitted that his rhythms were not derived directly from jazz, he aimed to approximate the spontaneity of improvisation and envisioned his long lines as being contained "within the elastic of one breath or one big streak of thought," like Kerouac's jazzman (Eberhart letter 152).

In the Afterword to Ginsberg's posthumous collection, *On Death & Fame*, the poet's assistant writes that "Ginsberg was one of very few poets who had the opportunity to refine the exact cadence of his lines through his frequent public readings" (Rosenthal 1164). This "reconnection to the bardic tradition of spoken poetry," stemmed in part, no doubt, from the Beats' interest in jazz performance, but also from the return to writing that mirrored the rhythms and diction of speech (Savage, par. 14). It was poetry enriched by the act of speaking, as Ginsberg's postscript to Williams instructs: "They are best & clearest read aloud" (Williams letter 150). This too marked a shift from the modernist aesthetic, which had deemphasized orality in favor of poetry for the page. Of course, another significant cause for the revival in poetry readings was the content of the Beats' writing. McClure admits that "the kinds of things we were saying had no publishers. So we did it right out loud" ("Memories" 277). And if Ginsberg said of the Beat poets, "We were built for it. I can talk. I'm an old ham," their audiences were just as eager (qtd. in Kubernik 259). An article on the mid-fifties poetry scene in San Francisco reports that "the audience participates, shouting and stamping, interrupting and applauding" (Eberhart 155). Such a response might seem overboard for the recitation of plain American language, but here a poet like Ginsberg benefited from his "intense, creaky, bardic voice," as well as the momentum gathered by the "propelling, torrential quality" of his long line (McClure, "Painting

Beat" 35; Tytell 64). This line, developed from Whitman, as well as a cast of international poets including Apollinaire, Artaud, Lorca, and Mayakovsky, drew its repetitive grammatical structure from Hebraic prayers, resulting in a powerful oral performance almost akin to chanting (Ginsberg and Corso 165).

While the Beats' writing was distinctly American, it drew inspiration from sources far beyond the national borders. The Columbia threesome read widely in existentialist and modern continental thought and poetics, including Gide, Spengler, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud (Breslin 72). On the West Coast, most of the Beat poets dabbled in Eastern thought at least briefly. And a few took a deeper interest. Whalen eventually became the abbot of the Zen center in the Castro, and Snyder studied Chinese and Japanese, translated the 1200 year old "Cold Mountain" poems of ascetic Buddhist Han Shan, and spent a decade in Japan training with Buddhist monks (McClure, "Painting Beat" 36; Tytell 65-66). The wider circle of Beat poets benefited most from their acquaintance with the haiku, a form that Kerouac characterized as "a sentence that's short and sweet with a sudden jump of thought" (Interview 27). Some Beats, like Kerouac, wrote English language haiku, in imitation of the Japanese form, while others, like Ginsberg and Whalen, reproduced the spirit of haiku in "post-Poundian assemblages of blocks of hard images set in juxtapositions," to create a sense of compression in lines that might otherwise veer toward prose (Ginsberg and Corso 165).

California Beats

Just as important as the Beats' literary influences were the settings that surrounded them. Snyder's "Riprap," for example, was influenced by "the geology of the Sierra Nevada," while *Myths and Texts* grew from his Forest Service employment: "long days of quiet in lookout cabins" (Snyder 420-421). Even Beat road-trip books, like Kerouac's *On the Road* and Ginsberg's *The Fall of America*, celebrate and exploit every "Dave's Eat Eat" and "brown wasteland scratched by tires," sponging up the specifics of place (*Fall of America* 30, 90). And for the Beats, more often than not

the setting or the ultimate destination was California. A latitudinal behemoth, California was perhaps the only single state that could accommodate a Whitman bard's wideview, offering forests, lakes, mountains, deserts, coastline, and major cities, all connected by miles upon miles of open highway. And while San Francisco and Los Angeles lent their names and landmarks to various Beat works, out of the way spots like Bubb's Creek, Big Sur, Mill Valley, and Bolinas played significant roles as well.

In fact, the natural settings of California, as well as Oregon and Washington, served as a catalyst for a major shift in Beat writing in the mid-fifties. The original Beat movement, exemplified by its East Coast wing, was a "guy-centered, urban thing but emphasized the urge to get out, *to get on the road*" (McClure, "Painting Beat" 36). And the road, along with their Denver-born friend Neal Cassady, led the Beats west. Ginsberg writes of the journey: "It was like a big prophecy, taking off to California. Like I had passed one season of my life and it was time to start all over again" (Kramer 39-40). On the West Coast, the Beats landed in San Francisco, a city that then, as now, stood slightly to one side of mainstream America, offering "a base of enlightened skepticism from which one could launch bilious grenades" (Puterbaugh 357). Its tradition of liberal thinking included the Berkeley Renaissance of the 1940s, artistic remnants of the Waldport, Oregon Conscientious Objectors' camp, the Anarchist Circle, *Living Marxism* (a local communist magazine), and the liberal faculty and students attracted to UC Berkeley and San Francisco State (Puterbaugh 357). Furthermore, by the mid-fifties, the place was positively buzzing with poets and artists, especially in North Beach where Lawrence Ferlinghetti opened City Lights Books, a meeting place for writers and the first American bookstore to sell only paperbacks (Cook 55). In 1956, City Lights also began publishing its own Pocket Poetry series, designed to fit in the back of a worker's jeans, promoting the idea that poetry was for everyone, regardless of class (Savage, par. 35). According to Kenneth Rexroth, an older poet who had lived in San Francisco since the 1920s, the Beats "hit all this stuff that had been bubbling away in San Francisco, and it sort of exploded them. They never heard of anything like this" (Cook 61).

The explosion that began the "new season" in earnest was the Six Gallery reading. Hailed as groundbreaking for its debut of "Howl," the event was also a watershed in that it placed Ginsberg, still writing mainly in an urban vein, side by side with his West Coast counterparts, whose poetry focused primarily on natural and spiritual themes. Whalen, the future Zen priest, read a series of "learned mystical-anarchic poems" that drew on his study of Asian religions coupled with wry personal observations (Ginsberg and Corso 165). McClure, who would later tackle theatre censorship with his play "The Beard," introduced an element of ecological activism to the Six Gallery reading with "For the Death of 100 Whales," which condemned the machine gunning of Icelandic whales by American soldiers (Waldman, "McClure" 314). But it was the last poet of the evening, former farmboy, lumberjack, and seaman Gary Snyder, who would have the most dramatic effect on the Beat writers. The sections he read that night from *Myths and Texts* contained the major themes of his work: Native American lore, Asian literature and religion, environmental conservation, anecdotal constructions, and lyrical outdoor concerns "about bears eating berries" (Kerouac, *Dharma Bums* 14).

Snyder's significance in Beat literature has always been underappreciated, and this is partly a matter of timing. Snyder's nearly 15 years in Asia studying Buddhism coincided with the Beats' somewhat delayed popularity in the United States, and the magazines and newspapers covering the "Beat story" neither interviewed nor mentioned him (Cook 29). Nevertheless, Snyder almost singlehandedly prompted the Beats' "movement toward union with nature" (Tytell 65). He began, simply enough, by taking Kerouac camping in the mountains, "teaching him a new independence, a new pride in the body" (Tytell 65). Called the "true heir of that Thoreau who retired to Walden," Snyder spent his childhood in the backwoods of Washington and felt at home in both his Marin County cabin and the West Coast wilderness that was initially so foreign to Kerouac (Howard 573). But Kerouac learned from Snyder, and even spent the summer of 1956 as a firewatcher on Desolation Peak, where he wrote *Desolation Blues*, just as Snyder and Whalen wrote "Lookout's Journal" and "Sourdough Mountain" while serving their

own firewatch duties on that nearby mountain (Waldman, "Beat Places" 365). The city never quite left Kerouac, who returned to Long Island every year to write at his mother's house (Cook 78). But his later work, like that of Ginsberg, reveals the influence of both urban and natural elements. Recalling Kerouac's recitation of "Sea" on the beach at Big Sur, McClure writes, "Such a poem could only come from an urban man who had been transfixed by the beauty and the awfulness of Big Sur" ("Painting Beat" 39).

A native outdoorsman, Snyder reflects a different, if related set of tensions in his work, particularly in *Myths and Texts*. The topic of much of his poetry is "nonhuman-centered nature," or even pre-human nature, an ecological nostalgia for the wilderness as it was before people (McClure, "Painting Beat" 37). But as the logger and hunter who imagined such a world, Snyder posed a threat to his own vision: "to have witnessed, it was necessary to be one of the destroyers" (Parkinson 138). This paradox became a lifelong preoccupation for the poet, whose work also includes environmental and bioregional scholarship and activism. The second tension was that of a pioneer who felt like an Indian. In his mid-twenties, Snyder felt torn between his admiration for Native Americans and his connection to the frontier lifestyle with "all those good old feelings about the American West" (Cook 32). Eventually, he says, he "kicked the whole thing and joined the Indians" (Cook 32). In time, his fascination with non-Western cultures and religions led Snyder to Buddhism, through which he introduced "the distinct taste of the East that flavored the whole Beat movement" (Cook 29).

Kerouac dramatized this introduction and the significant shift it began in *The Dharma Bums*, a warm ode to his friendship with Snyder. The novel replaced *On the Road*'s frantic escapes from the material and the humdrum with "a quietly contemplative retreat toward meditation" (Tytell 65). But while Buddhism stood in contrast to some of the Beats' earlier, manic sensibilities, many of its tenets were familiar. Snyder identifies two main similarities: "the virtue of poverty as a way of avoiding the materialism that has depleted the soul of the West, and the virtue of wandering, that is, no confinement whether spiritual or physical" (qtd. in Tytell 66). To

born wanderers like Kerouac and Cassady, he relayed anecdotes of the original "truth bums," Zen monks who roamed historical countrysides, aesthetes, poets, and holy men not so different from themselves (Cook 29). The Beat movement had always been spiritual. Kerouac stressed that "beat" referred not to juvenile delinquents but "characters of a special spirituality" (qtd. in Waldman, Introduction xxi). It was a word related to "beatitude" and "beatific," a down-and-out humbleness that allows for spiritual illumination (Waldman, Introduction xiv). For many of the Beats, spiritual illumination came in a hybrid form. Kerouac translated the Sutras and even began a biography of the Buddha, but he remained a steadfast Catholic throughout his life. Even at the peak of Kerouac's fervor for Zen, Snyder teased him that he'd end up asking for the Last Rites on his deathbed (Cook 84). Ginsberg, on the other hand, eschewed his Jewish roots from an early age, dabbling in mysticism and pharmacological lore, and crafting poems that "emerge from a matrix of Taoism, Zen, Beatness, and Existentialism" (Merrill 92). Even so, "Howl" and "Kaddish" are rich with Hebraic rhythms and, in his later years, Ginsberg's poetry developed "an especially familial and Jewish emphasis" (Ball 244). But regardless of the religious beliefs to which the Beats individually subscribed, Snyder's introduction of Eastern thought unquestionably began a new chapter in the Beat movement, influencing its members' philosophy, drug use, travel plans, and writing.

Method and Myth

For Kerouac, the logical consequence of spontaneous poetry or prose based on absolute honesty was the "free deviation of mind into limitless blow-on subject seas of thought" (qtd. in Bartlett 119). He advocated the straight transcription of wandering perceptions, without the "deadening losses that result from beaver-logic building dams against the flow" (Holmes 11). Entering into a semi-trance state, with or without drugs, often aided in freeing the unconscious to produce quickly that which "conscious art would censor" (qtd. in Bartlett 119). What is most interesting, though, is Kerouac's attitude toward subsequent revision of these transcribed

thoughts. He regarded the process as "a kind of secondary moral censorship imposed by the unconscious" (Tytell 62-63). Lamenting that the literary superego still separated written speech from spoken speech, he drew a parallel to a man telling a story to a bar full of friends: "Did you ever hear that guy stop to revise himself, go back to a previous sentence to improve it?" (Interview 5). Kerouac passed his enthusiasm for spontaneous writing on to other Beat poets, including Ginsberg, who writes in the preface to his *Collected Poems 1947-1980*, "First thought, best thought.' Spontaneous insight – the sequence of thought-forms passing naturally through ordinary mind – was always motif and method of these compositions" (6). In reality, though, both men exaggerated their absolute adherence to this dictum.

It is true that Ginsberg and Kerouac wrote and published some prose and poetry by this method. In some of his *Reality Sandwiches* poems, for example, Ginsberg trumpets his spontaneity, recording in the margins the precise time each stanza was written, leaving misspellings intact, and wondering in the text about the effects of various drugs he has just taken. One reviewer complains of these experiments: "syntax is shot on sight, things are described in a catalogue of gasps" (MacCaig 20). Kerouac's *Book of Dreams* has a similar feeling of hazy inventory, offering readers the raw material of the Kerouac/Duluoz saga through the author's just-awake dream journal entries, "swiftly scribbled in pencil in my little dream notebook till I had exhausted every rememberable item" (Kerouac, back cover). Kerouac's long prose poem *Old Angel Midnight* represents a related project: the partially spontaneous recording "of babbling world tongues coming in thru [sic] my window at midnight no matter where I live or what I'm doing" (Kerouac, back cover). McClure praised the poem for its side-by-side treatment of the profound and the ordinary, commenting, "Never before has inconsequentiality been raised to such a peak that it becomes a breakthrough" (*Old Angel* xxi). Others, however, were not as impressed by the "kitchen sink" descriptions spontaneous writing often produced. One review of Kerouac's *Visions of Cody*, a novel that includes not only spontaneous prose, but also verbatim transcriptions of "long and irredeemably stoned-out conversations" between Kerouac and Cassady, points to its "unceasing

mania for detail," whether important or trivial (Rogers 150). While recording everything without filters or editing might be the Beat vision, the reviewer writes, "it is also the vision of the alien: the observer who has no real idea what's at stake" (Rogers 150). In part, what is at stake is the subversion of hierarchical determinations of importance, but the tediousness and incoherence of much spontaneous writing turned off many readers before that message could sink in.

In contrast, some of Ginsberg and Kerouac's most celebrated works were not produced spontaneously. Despite Ginsberg's claims that he was merely writing as he talked to friends or taking down his "coherent mental flow," several *Howl* manuscript poems show signs of careful construction and revision (Eberhart letter 153). In "A Strange New Cottage in Berkeley," for instance, the poet recounts a day spent puttering around his new home, just as he might tell his friends. But, as Marjorie Perloff points out, he would hardly do so "in the sequence found in the poem, a sequence that moves carefully from the ordinary to the strange" and ends with an erotic metaphor about an angel that harks back to Ginsberg's earlier work in traditional lyric poetry (203). Even "Howl" itself is now available in a facsimile collection of drafts and influences that reveals its intentional stylistic experiments, diverse sources and allusions, and what Ginsberg called "the fucking obvious construction of the poem" (Hollander letter 163-164). The original typewritten draft of Part I shows x-marks as the poet changes his mind, a practice Kerouac criticized as lying when he received the draft (Ginsberg letter 150). Nevertheless, Ginsberg went on to revise "Howl" significantly, producing at least eighteen drafts of Part II alone (*Howl* 56-87).

Kerouac, too, planned and revised. While the mythology surrounding *On the Road* holds that the author wrote the novel on a one-hundred-foot scroll of Japanese tracing paper in April 1951 "in a three week frenzy fueled by Benzedrine and coffee," in fact he had drafted large portions of the novel as early as 1948, and these he re-typed nearly verbatim (Brinkley 113-114). In addition, he had already sketched his characters, outlined detailed plot lines for each chapter, written sections of dialogue, and made a list of key phrases to work in from other writers (Brinkley 114). So, while much of *On the Road* was spontaneous prose, it was built on years of

planning in the notebooks Kerouac carried around. Furthermore, Malcolm Cowley, the editor of *On the Road*, always maintained that Kerouac "did a good bit of revision, and it was very good revision," even if he wouldn't admit to it afterward (qtd. in Brinkley 115).

In fact, these myths and exaggerations persist precisely because their subjects encouraged them. Both Ginsberg and Kerouac gave interviews and wrote statements asserting that the strictly spontaneous method was at the heart of their writing, even while Kerouac's journals were full of preparations and Ginsberg's typists were updating drafts (Rosenthal 1164). Biographer Douglas Brinkley suggests an explanation for this disparity: "Given his infatuation with the spontaneity of jazz, it is not surprising that the fastidious Kerouac preferred the image of a natural-born, wild-eyed Rimbaud-like genius rather than an exacting cobbler of words" (111). Both writers valued the freedom and honesty that characterized spontaneous writing, but expressed these ideals most effectively when they *crafted* a spontaneous style.

Honesty and Obscenity

Regardless of the method by which it was created, Beat poetry is notable for its candor and its emphasis on "the common, the intimate, and the personal" (Creeley x). Kerouac cites "Goethe's prophecy that the future literature of the West would be confessional in nature," but the Beats were among the first American poets to embrace and work extensively within a confessional mode (Interview 5-6). The nation's literati, influenced by Eliot's idea of the poem as an impersonal artifact, as well as more general principles about acceptable literary subject matter and diction, were not universally impressed by the Beats' commonplace topics, their confessional and colloquial language, or their lack of adherence to established forms. In the *Partisan Review*'s Spring 1957 edition, John Hollander bemoans "the utter lack of decorum of any kind" in *Howl and Other Poems*, which he characterizes as a "dreadful little volume" (161). Meanwhile, Truman Capote famously sneered that *On the Road* was more typing than writing and Randall Jarrell

suggested in his 1960 National Book Award speech that Kerouac's personal revelations were better suited to "successful psychoanalysis than fiction" (Rogers 149; qtd. in Tytell 55).

But the literary old guard was not the Beats' only critic. The disinclination of some Beat writers to censor personal depictions of sexuality (especially gay sexuality), drug use, and vulgar vernacular language brought their work to the attention of several governmental agencies and ultimately propelled Beat literature onto the public stage through the "Howl" obscenity trial. The saga of *People vs. Ferlinghetti*, as the obscenity trial was officially known, began in March 1957, when the San Francisco Collector of Customs seized 520 copies of Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* en route to City Lights from the printer in England (Ferlinghetti 169). Ferlinghetti found a new printer within the United States, removing the undersized volume of "suspect literature" from customs jurisdiction, and San Francisco's U.S. Attorney opted not to institute condemnation proceedings. But the San Francisco Police, led by the department's Juvenile Bureau, arrested Ferlinghetti and City Lights shop manager Shigeyoshi Murao for publishing and selling obscene material, namely *Howl* (Ferlinghetti 169-170).

What followed was a "nationally watched trial that attracted much attention to poetry, City Lights," and the Beat poets (McClure, "Painting Beat" 38). Recognizing the precedent the case would set for censorship laws, a team of ACLU lawyers, together with well-known San Francisco attorney J.W. Ehrlich, defended Ferlinghetti at no cost. They called nine expert witnesses, primarily from university English faculties, and submitted written statements and letters of support from prominent writers, editors, publishers, and professors around the country, all attesting to the literary merit and social importance of *Howl* (Ferlinghetti 170). Prosecutor Ralph McIntosh, "a specialist in smut cases," read aloud sections from "Howl," "each with its quota of Anglo-Saxon words or vivid sexual images" and inquired of Ehrlich's witnesses what Ginsberg was trying to say and whether he might not have used more palatable language (Perlman 172). Each witness testified that the poem was intended to offer candid social criticism in the rhythms and diction of ordinary speech, that is, the sometimes coarse language spoken

routinely on the streets (Perlman 172). After a summer-long trial and two weeks of deliberation, Judge Clayton Horn explained the body of precedent to a crowded courtroom: "Unless the book is entirely lacking in 'Social importance' [sic] it cannot be held obscene" (174). Finding that *Howl* had "some redeeming social importance," Horn ruled that it was not obscene and added that "an author should be real in treating his subject and be allowed to express his thoughts and ideas in his own words" (174). Horn's decision, along with those issued at the subsequent obscenity trials for Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* and the journal *Big Table* (which published Burroughs and Kerouac), signaled the decline of literary censorship in the United States (Savage, par. 18).

Public Perceptions and Cultural Impact

The "Howl" obscenity trial was most Americans' first exposure to Beat literature. Ferlinghetti writes gleefully of the initial customs seizure, "It would have taken years for critics to accomplish what the good collector did in a day, merely by calling the book obscene" (169). But while the verdict was a vindication of First Amendment rights, a taint of obscenity and lawlessness continued to hang about the Beats. In the public mind, the Beats fused with the antisocially violent "hipsters" of Norman Mailer's 1957 essay "The White Negro," despite the extreme *lack* of violence to be found in the majority of Beat literature (Cook 93-95). A 1959 feature in *Life* magazine depicts the writers as "contemptible, dangerous, slovenly madmen" and a *Partisan Review* critic attributes juvenile crime to the Beat works' "resentment against normal feeling" (McClure, "Painting Beat" 37; Podhoretz 39). Others simply refused to see anything but destruction, rebellion, and negativity in Beat literature and characterized the writers as anti-American nihilists. These charges stung and confused the Beats. "It is not true that *On the Road* is an evil influence on the young," Kerouac wrote to a friend, "it's simply a true story about an ex-cowboy and an ex-football player running around the country looking for pretty girls to love" (qtd. in Brinkley 118). Ginsberg, too, was adamant that the Beat message was one of sympathy and honesty, rather than delinquency or aggression. In a lengthy letter to a reporter, he writes

that "Howl's" criticism is only that society lacked mercy, and insists that the poem is an act of love intended to awaken "compassion and realization of the beauty of souls in America" (Eberhart letter 152, 154).

Furthermore, if Ginsberg leveled criticism at a specifically American society in "Howl" and his other works (including the provocatively titled *The Fall of America*), it was not because he considered himself un-American or exempt from his own indictment (Cook 24). In fact, in the protest poem "America," he writes: "It occurs to me that I am America. I am talking to myself again" (*Collected Poems* 115). Part political protester, part Whitmanesque bard, Ginsberg understood that one was as much an American tradition as the other and argued that the Beats seemed like anti-American rebels only to those who regarded then-current "standard American values as permanent" (qtd. in Burroughs 161). Kerouac took these accusations harder, perhaps in part because he was a first-generation American who felt America had given his family a "good break," and in part because he vehemently opposed the Communist and radical views associated with "un-Americanism" (Interview 47). But, while the lifelong Catholic moderate maintained that he "was the American grain, not some radical flaming against it," Kerouac's "American grain" was somewhat unusual for the time, welcoming hobos, prostitutes, jazzmen, migrant workers, outlaws, and other such downtrodden deviants (qtd. in Brinkley 119). His "proletariat tall tales" redeemed addicts and con-man like *On the Road's* Dean Moriarty, who Kerouac called "a new kind of American Saint," naively characterizing the criminal tendencies of Dean's real-life counterpart Neal Cassady as a "wild-eyed overburst of American joy" (qtd. in Brinkley 111-112). Unfortunately, in a Red Scare era, in which textbook committees excised references to Robin Hood and the Quakers because of their "communist leanings," Kerouac and his automobile-age cowboys and "honest drifters" were spurned as anything but all-American folk heroes (Brinkley 112).

Part of the problem was the conflation of Beat with the stereotypical "beatnik." A San Francisco columnist coined the latter term in 1959, tacking the "nik" from the Russian Sputnik

onto the Beats to create an instant television stock character with vague Communist connotation (Beck 98). Far from the hitchhikers, mountaineers, and railroad brakemen of the Beat generation, archetypal beatniks dressed in berets and goatees and sought "dingy cellars to spew free-form poems" to bongo beats, while guzzling java and wine (Beck 95). Soon they appeared everywhere, from *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, where teenaged Maynard G Krebs howled his protest at the idea of work, to North Beach itself, which became a tourist attraction and a "stage for people thinking they were Beats" (McClure, "Painting Beat" 37). The media's beatnik hype focused on clichés of adolescent laziness, pseudo-intellectualism, and vapid overuse of key Beat lingo ("crazy," "dig"), distorting the themes and often eclipsing the real literary output of the Beat writers, many of whom were by then in their thirties and disheartened at becoming a "pop-culture joke" (Brinkley 118).

But the beatniks were only the first of several groups and movements that would, for better or worse, borrow from and expand on Beat interests and ideals. The most obvious, the hippie counterculture, was not a straightforward offshoot of the Beat generation, but it nevertheless inherited some of its tenets. Ferlinghetti identifies some of these as "the turn toward the Far East, Buddhist philosophy and mysticism in general, ecological consciousness, political positions" (qtd. in Puterbaugh 362). The last of these is the most controversial, since the Beat writers represented a wide diversity of political positions, and consequently had a variety of reactions to the hippie and anti-war movements. Some of the younger Beats, including Ginsberg, McClure, and Snyder, tried with some success to set themselves up as mentors to the fledgling counterculture, organizing and reading poetry at such events as the 1967 Human Be-In in San Francisco (Puterbaugh 360). Cassady, too, found a place in 1960's counterculture, driving Ken Kesey's Day-Glo bus cross-country on the Merry Pranksters' famed LSD promotional tour of 1964 (Brinkley 121).

Kerouac, on the other hand, was horrified to find himself dubbed "the Father of the Psychedelic Sixties," as Kerouac wannabes created a "soaring hysteria" from his work (Brinkley

109, 120). Privately opposed to the Vietnam War but supportive of the troops, he tried desperately to disassociate himself from Ginsberg, especially, telling the *Paris Review*, "I'm pro-American and the radical political involvements seem to tend elsewhere" (Interview 46-47). Ironically, Kerouac, whose interest in jazz and Black culture had played an important role in making the Beats "the first white subculture to extol the virtues of smoking grass," was also appalled to watch the hippies take up dope en masse (McCormick 367). Aware that the national fascination with drugs was a legacy of his group's spiritual experiments with everything from peyote to heroin, Kerouac nevertheless writes in his last published piece, a 1969 article subtitled "I'm a Bippie in the Middle" that "under Timothy Leary's guiding proselytization no one in America could address a simple envelope" ("Thinking About" 184). Opposing the tides of change, Kerouac furthermore rejected Ginsberg's opinion that "sexual liberation, particularly gay liberation," was a Beat theme, refusing to allow his own work to be published in anthologies containing Ginsberg's homoerotic poetry (Ginsberg, Foreword xvi; Brinkley 119). But, in fact, the Beats' frank treatment of sex, urged on by Kerouac's relentless call for honesty, directly contributed to the end of literary censorship and the beginning of a national discussion about civil rights, including gay rights.

Anne Waldman, of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, writes that the Beats "influenced and encouraged subsequent generations of writers by prodigious example," and certainly this is true (Introduction xxiii). But their example was more than literary. Burroughs, for one, argues that the Beats left us with "a freer America" than the one they found, where "a four-letter word couldn't appear on the printed page, and minority rights were ridiculous" (qtd. in Waldman, Introduction xx-xxi). In a way, then, even Ginsberg's claim that the Beats' sexual liberation led indirectly to "women's lib and black lib" has merit, in spite of the Beats' primarily white male constituency and the oft made claims that their work is sexist and exploitative of Black culture (Ginsberg, Foreword xvi). Regardless of ideological or stylistic differences, the Beat writers offered everyone who followed, from environmentalists to punk

rockers, "a bold, forthright template for revolt and uncensored self-expression" (Puterbaugh 362). If, as Ginsberg wrote, "Walt Whitman gave the world permission to speak with candor," then the Beats reissued that permission as a challenge (*Collected Poems* 937).

Wanderlust and the Beats Part One: Transportation and Place

I first encountered the Beats while still in high school. *On the Road*, in particular, appealed to the wanderlust I felt so acutely in my collapsing Midwestern hometown. Every spring, I got the itch to jump in my car and take off. In a way this was natural for a child of Detroit, a city that first manufactured cars and then saw its jobless citizens scurry away in them. Reading *On the Road* simultaneously increased my sense of urgency and calmed me with the knowledge that soon I would have the freedom to go. Thematically, this is the strongest link between my collection and Beat literature: *Wanderlust* is a book about going places. It's about the places, but also the distance between them, the how as much as the where.

The "how" in this case refers to methods of travel. In my collection, cars, planes, trains, and boats provide moving stages for the majority of the poems. In addition to powering the shift through landscapes, each vehicle's unique space also elicits a variety of responses from the characters, ranging from paranoid anxiety in the nervous flier to a reckless sense of invincibility in the sleepy road-tripper ("The San Francisco Self-Examiner"; "Maverick City Sons"). In a few poems, the vehicles themselves even take on central purposes, as objects to be spotted in a driving game, or as the inspiration for a citywide festival ("Padiddle"; "The Woodward Dream Cruise"). The celebration of the car, especially, and not just where it goes, derives in part from my childhood in the Motor City, with its worship of the automobile in all its forms, from fifties hotrods at the Dream Cruise to the next generation of hybrids at the Auto Show. In Detroit this enthusiasm is simply inevitable, and I suspect that, despite my eco-friendly behavior, I will

always harbor a fondness for cars. But my romantic attention to automobiles also reflects a similar tendency in Beat literature, which glorifies the fast car, whether stolen, borrowed, or hitched, in prose works like *On the Road*, as well as poetry such as Ginsberg's "The Green Automobile" and *The Fall of America*. To the Beats, cars represented freedom, adventure, and a uniquely American sense of virility and power to be enjoyed by automobile-age cowboys. In contrast, their other celebrated mode of transport, the hopped railroad car, symbolized freedom and adventure, but also humility and simplicity. It features most famously in *The Dharma Bums*, in which the Kerouac character shares his wine with a saintly old hobo atop a freight car, prefiguring the transitional novel's main theme of spiritual beatness (7-9).

Three poems in *Wanderlust* pay particular tribute to the Beats' preferred methods of travel. "Railroad Rosie" presents a romantic depiction of Railroad Rosie and Lil' Jay, a pair of 21st century hobos whose style of life is not all that different from the hobos' of Kerouac's day. Its songlike structure features brief choruses alternating with non-stop long line stanzas that follow an imperfectly steady beat intended to suggest the momentum of a train. This sound experiment takes its inspiration from Kerouac's "October In The Railroad Earth," which is meant to "clack along all the way like a steam engine pulling a one-hundred-car freight with a talky caboose at the end" (Interview 5). But, just as importantly, "Railroad Rosie" is a love poem. I wanted to show the human relationship and the kindness between two people who would fit quite comfortably into Kerouac's pantheon of socially undesirable heroes. Despite their unusual lifestyle and appearance, Lil' Jay and Railroad Rosie are a young couple in love, or as they call it, hobolove. The poem's dedication is to Jason "Lil' Jay" Litzner, who spent years riding the rails before falling to his death between Tacoma and San Francisco in October 2006.

"Highway 1" is a 21st century hitchhiking poem, in the tradition of Gregory Corso's "Poets Hitchhiking on the Highway" (7). Set beside a dairy on some unspecified stretch of New Zealand's Highway 1, the poem initially adopts the observational stance of one who is waiting. Much like Ginsberg's poem "In the Baggage Room at Greyhound," "Highway 1" catalogs the

different sorts of drivers and passengers gliding by in a "Sunday parade" of cars (Collected Poems 161-162; "Highway 1," line 3). It quickly becomes apparent though that the poem's focus is, in fact, the speaker's *failure* to hitch a ride. And, like the unlucky hitchhiker in Kerouac's *Big Sur*, the speaker in "Highway 1" begins to take her lack of success a bit personally, linking it to the rejection she feels as a result of a recent break-up (42-48).

"Maverick City Sons" completes the Beat transport trio. The poem follows the first 13 hours of a gumball-rally style cross-country road trip, beginning in Los Angeles and heading east through Nevada, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado. In "[abandoning] that vertical seasalt Legoland" and heading away from the city, the poem echoes McClure's judgment that getting on the road was the first step in Beat literature's transition from urban to natural themes ("Maverick City Sons," line 1; "Painting Beat" 36). Beginning even with its title, the poem explores the unique perspective of the urban man in a natural setting. He is surprised, for example, to realize that there is so much unoccupied desert space just an hour outside of the metropolitan mire of Los Angeles (lines 9-10). And in failing to capture Utah's "backcountry firmament" with his camera, he indirectly suggests that the product of a city can never really adjust to country life (lines 22-24). But the overall tone of the poem is not contemplative. The "Maverick City Sons" relish the adventure of exploring rural America, albeit along the nation's interstates, and they enjoy the breathless challenge of driving continuously, until finally the speaker actually falls asleep at the wheel.

I try to mirror the breathlessness of the gumball-rally effort through a long line resembling Ginsberg's or Whitman's. Longer versions of the line appear in "Saturday Morning," "Boys on the Beach," "Venice," and "Angelino in Dunedin." In these last two, especially, the action twists and turns through a particular location, and the continuous line acts like a movie camera tagging along and recording everything in a single shot. The effect is similar in "Maverick City Sons," though I am slightly more liberal with the pauses. One thing I do not attempt to do, with any of my long-line poems, is to standardize the length of phrases into so-called jazz breaths.

While it is true that a written musical chorus contains a certain number of measures, only theoretically does this correspond to the actual breath capacity of a given musician. I have played the trumpet since I was a child and I know that you breathe when you can no longer sustain the sound as you would like. The same is true of reading aloud, and I trust that my readers will breathe when necessary, regardless of whether my phrase is finished. Incidentally, this approach creates the desired effect of breathlessness quite satisfactorily.

To signal the increasing tiredness of the driver in "Maverick City Sons," I switch from the high-energy long line to a Ginsberg-style incantation appealing to a vaguely theistic-sounding "No Name of the sluice-sliced canyon" to sing a lullaby composed of both the natural features of the Colorado Rockies and the names of the manmade exits signposted along the route (lines 37-41). "No Name," essentially a Nature spirit, finally obliges in the final stanza, when the two road-trippers lie down on a sleeping bag beside a gas station. The spirit identifies them as city boys, but invites them to breathe in the "north-country air" and the "wet whispering of white-fisted firs," finally claiming them as "my boys" and sending them to sleep (lines 54-56). Thus the urban men finally achieve a certain oneness with the natural world.

Romantic oneness with the natural world is not, however, the primary focus of *Wanderlust*. One of the earlier incarnations of my collection included a section of natural history topics in poetic form, and elements of that approach remain in poems like "Rain," "The Worm Poem," and "Sonoran Song." But, overall, *Wanderlust* occupies a middle ground, prioritizing neither big cities nor the minute workings of nature. In fact, most of the poems in this collection take place in ordinary places: small towns, suburbs, or in the space between cities. Marjorie Perloff writes that Ginsberg's work is "just as celebratory of Wichita, Kansas, as of Machu Picchu," and I similarly intend for *Wanderlust* to celebrate overlooked little hamlets like Durant, Iowa with the same enthusiasm as it celebrates the famous Venice Beach (215). Furthermore, as I am aware of the city-dweller's tendency to make disparaging comparisons in terms of size, I try to keep Whitman's purpose in mind: "I will trail the whole geography of the globe and salute

courteously every city large and small" (42). And so even a poem like "Angelino in Dunedin," which playfully compares Dunedin to Los Angeles, is meant to communicate the distinctive flavor and endearing qualities of each, rather than to attempt to judge between them.

For each locale in *Wanderlust*, regardless of its size or notoriety, I aimed to create a strong sense of place. My initial approach was similar to that of Ginsberg in *The Fall of America*, in that I tried to assemble enough details to convey specificity and mood, but without succumbing to Ginsberg's laundry list tendency. I have lived in, been to, or at the very least been through nearly every place mentioned in the collection, and undertaken extensive research besides, so as to offer a series of authentic, familiar snapshots. But, ironically, the most difficult place to work with was the one in which I've been living for most of the last three years: New Zealand. As a foreigner, and especially as an American, I was wary of trying to represent the landscape, people, and customs of New Zealand to New Zealanders. I worried that, in spite of my feeling that I belong here (by virtue of my partnership with a Kiwi, among other things), I would appear to be sentimentalizing or appropriating New Zealand culture, simply by trying to depict it in poetry. The solution, I decided, was to be entirely honest about my perspective. I resolved, in fact, to use my American heritage explicitly as a lens for viewing my adoptive country, to "report all heroism from an American point of view," as Whitman puts it (42). I thought back to my earliest reactions to New Zealand, before I became adjusted, and produced "Highway 1," "Shorn," "Canterbury Plains," and "Angelino in Dunedin" from these memories. With these admissions and anchors of perspective firmly in place, I felt at liberty to represent New Zealand in a less consciously comparative way throughout the rest of the *Overseas* section. Still, I suspect that my outsider's point of view comes through in these, too.

In contrast, I view California through a lens of nostalgia and homesickness. Like Ginsberg, I began a new season of my life in California. In fact, it might be more accurate to say that I began my own life in earnest in California. At 18, I graduated from high school, came out, and started university in Los Angeles. And while I had known for some time that I would

eventually make the pilgrimage west – Thoreau's "American intuitive direction" – I had no idea how different California would be from the Midwest, or indeed from the rest of America (Holmes 7). Parke Puterbaugh writes that San Francisco in the 1950s was "in America but not completely of it" and this continues to be true for the whole of California (357). In fact, in "This Country's not an Island," a poem that relates my initial impressions of California as I remember them, I take it one step further, asserting that "this is not America, this is California / Of course there is a difference" (lines 7-8). In spite of California's inevitable entanglement with the other 49 states, I maintain that it *feels* different, and better, to be in California than to be anywhere else in the U.S. Of course, this feeling is a memory, and symptomatic of the homesick condition of being thousands of miles away.

Fortunately, other poets share my nostalgia. In particular, I found *The California Poem* by Eleni Sikelianos a useful model for reconstructing the state at a distance. A California native living in nearby Colorado, Sikelianos tackles the entirety of California, ecosystem by ecosystem, in her bright, tactile, book-length poem. As she interweaves her own history with the natural history of her home state, Sikelianos's homesickness is palpable, and as one blurb points out, "To be homesick for the whole of California requires a vast imagination" (Howe, back cover). But Sikelianos does not allow her homesickness to rose-tint her memories. She knows that much of what comes to mind when she thinks of California is a dream: "The when I go back to my homeland California is a paradise I am happy for you dream" (12). But, in fact, what Sikelianos remembers is not always paradisiacal. She recalls, for example, "the ricochet of neighbors fighting" and trailer parks where "everybody's halfcracked with halfteeth missing and ideas of almost functioning" (57, 18). Furthermore, she is aware that California's flora and fauna are fast disappearing, and that places and people she once knew are no longer there, or no longer the same. In short, "Memory can be anyone's shimmering / Albion" but reality is a very different matter (Sikelianos 23).

With this in mind, I sought to create a romantic, but also somewhat realistic portrait of the three years I spent in California. I adopted for the middle section of *Wanderlust*, and to a lesser extent the other two sections, Kerouac's "everything's collapsing" structure from *On the Road*. Each one begins with a naïve, idealistic quotation to signal a new beginning, but reaches, at the very least, a more complicated viewpoint by the end of the section. The first half of *Overland* is a celebration of the freedom and opportunities for friendship and love occasioned by my new home. The high point occurs with the exhilarating road trip of "Maverick City Sons," but from there, the mood descends through heartbreak, loneliness, and disenchantment. By the last three poems in *Overland* section, California is no longer a lighthearted, happy place, but a source of anxiety and disappointment, and the time has come to leave. When the scene finally returns to Los Angeles, in *Wanderlust*'s final poem, "King-East Revisited," the visiting ex-pat experiences a form of reverse culture shock while touring the city she still thinks of as home. In some ways, the poem presents the flip side of "Angelino in Dunedin," but the former Angelino's disorientation causes her greater disturbance in Los Angeles precisely because she did not expect it. The poem closes with a bittersweet comment on memory: "you find your Spanish dubbed out of sync / like everything else you think you remember" (lines 23-24). The implication is that when the traveler leaves home, she leaves that home forever. Returning to the same space, she will find a different city there, and one that is potentially just as foreign to her as the places she has visited.

Wanderlust and the Beats Part Two: Sources, Sex, and Friendship

In his *Paris Review* interview, Kerouac asserted that the only thing he had to offer was "the true story of what I saw and how I saw it" (6). *Wanderlust* is similarly full of stories. In fact, one of the toughest challenges of writing this thesis has been learning how *not* to let every poem become a story. My difficulty has its roots, I think, in the Midwest. Not only can Midwesterners spin fantastic yarns, but we are also brought up to avoid confrontation. Even now, when I find myself

in a social setting bubbling with animated debate, I can argue, but I would rather tell stories. Add to this cultural conditioning a childhood spent reading novels and, by 18, I was a budding prose writer. I only stumbled on poetry by chance. My undergraduate creative writing program required all fiction writers to take one poetry class, and I wanted to get it out of the way early. But I loved the class and switched my focus to poetry. Still, I continue to fight that storyteller's urge to get to the punch line, or "to resolve the narrative," as my supervisor puts it. And travel themes, which offer a natural narrative of departure and arrival, beginning and end, only exacerbate the problem. Still, I am pleased with the final balance of story-poems, partial story-poems, and non-story-poems in *Wanderlust*.

My success in achieving this balance results in part from a decision to go beyond true stories. One of the reasons I settled on a travel theme for my collection was that I would have plenty of personal material to use. Poems like "Maverick City Sons" and "The Woodward Dream Cruise," for example, are faithful retellings of events from my life. But using true stories, especially my own stories, increases my compulsion to present readers with thorough, linear accounts of the incidents. By contrast, when I allow myself to work with a theme or setting that does not bring to mind any particular anecdote, I create more open, less narrative-driven poetry. But I do not believe, as Kerouac contended at times, that I dispense with any core sense of honesty when I depart from purely experience-based poetry. I continue to write on themes that interest me and from seeds of personal experience, though a poem's development sometimes decentralizes these early inspirations. But even imaginative mood pieces like "His Blue Moons" and "The way it felt to be so warm" take root in ordinary observations of a friend smoking and my partner's parents' farm, respectively, and grow into an atmosphere of fantasy and legend.

Dreams are also a fruitful source of ideas, and one that Kerouac himself advocated as inherently honest, despite being non-experiential. While I sleep rather poorly, I dream cinematically and often take notes on my dreams, as Kerouac did. In particular, I draw on their synesthetic quality in poems like "Tell Me a Story," which, in spite of its title, sprung directly

from a dream, rather than a true story. Snippets of other poems, including "Turn Back Your Clocks" and "We Get On," developed while I teetered on the edge of sleep, and I scribbled these down, too. This is, however, the closest I come to composing poetry in the trance-like state Kerouac recommends. In addition, my experiments with automatic writing and drunk-writing have produced little that is useable afterward, and so I prefer generally to write, as well as to plan and to edit, while awake, focused, and sober.

My defiance of the tenets of spontaneous composition does not, however, detract from my ability to craft smooth, fast-paced poetry with the same feeling of freedom that spontaneous writing aims to create. Nor does my crafting require that I adopt an artificial, hieratic style of language. At many points, *Wanderlust* very closely reflects a common mode of speech. In particular, to strengthen the sense of place in each poem, I endeavor to use a vernacular appropriate to the setting, a fact that is perhaps most evident in the differences in diction between the American sections and the New Zealand section. But I do not confine myself, as the Beats often did, to language "grounded in anything I could say to somebody, that they wouldn't notice I was really saying it as poetry" (Ginsberg qtd. in Kubernik 259). After all, I am writing, not talking, and often the best word or phrase for my purposes is not one I would readily use verbally. For example, I cannot imagine describing someone as a "freight-line envoy / straight ex-con boy" in conversation, but to simulate the momentum of a train, with a bit of playful rhyming, this is just the phrase I need ("Railroad Rosie," lines 7-8).

I stray most markedly from the Beat preference for commonplace language and straightforward storytelling when it comes to depictions of sexuality. Like the Beats, I try to be honest about sex. Four years at a Catholic high school exposed me to a dangerous culture of fear, secrecy, and guilt that warps what is, after all, a natural set of acts. I want to combat social and religious shame and anxiety about sex through positive, joyful portrayals of intimacy and love. But at the same time, I am aware that I can only push boundaries effectively if my audience is still reading. My worry, though, is less about being offensive than about being tedious. Some poets,

and Ginsberg is a prime example, manage to make what were no doubt exciting encounters perfectly boring, often through too much unedited detail combined with a smattering of four-letter-words that no longer pack the radical punch they once did. Take Ginsberg's "Many Loves," for instance. This two and a half page poetic rendering of the poet's first sexual experience with Neal Cassady reads like a play-by-play that, despite its provocative subject matter, could as easily describe a routine trip to the mailbox for all the interest it holds for the reader (*Collected Poems* 164-166). While this does have a normalizing effect, making gay sex just as ordinary as the mailbox run, this was certainly not Ginsberg's intention. The problem is that personal sexual experiences, like true stories, are so inherently fascinating to the poet that he cannot imagine how a straight transcription of the events could fail to fascinate his readers. But it does fail in that way, and the solution is not self-censorship, as Kerouac might complain, but greater subtlety.

My collection, as initially envisioned, was to focus on themes of gender, sexuality, and the body. I found, however, that my sex-themed poems were taking on a dull, self-regarding quality similar to some of Ginsberg's. So I tried dismantling one and fitting some of the pieces alongside the natural imagery of a nighttime desert scene. The result was "Sonoran Song," in which complementary notions of thirst interact and reinforce each other to greater effect than in the original poem. From there I shifted my attention to themes of place and transportation but still found that elements of sexuality cropped up naturally throughout the collection, in situations as various as visiting a cemetery or riding a bicycle ("Beside the Church," line 9; "We Get On," lines 18-19). In most cases, sexuality provides context, signals a shift, or adds a layer to my poems, instead of acting as the main focus. And sometimes it's ambiguous whether sex is even involved, as is the case with the many characters who simply cuddle in bed together, a symptom perhaps of the interminable Dunedin winter during which I wrote much of this collection. Another ambiguous example is "Padiddle," which contains suggestive nudity but is ultimately a celebration of gleeful teenage mischief rather than of any serious sexual theme.

Surprisingly, it is *Wanderlust*'s darker depictions of sex that link most strongly to the Beats. I refer primarily to the ambiguous violence surrounding the highly magnetic travelling figure in "His Blue Moons" and the high school date rape that apparently precipitates a mental breakdown in "Turn Back Your Clocks." Models for such figures and scenarios may be found in the less celebrated histories of some of Beat literature's central figures, whose misogynistic attitudes complement a shocking record of behavior. The offensiveness of this behavior – from Cassady's physical and sexual violence toward his series of wives to Kerouac's refusal to acknowledge or support his daughter – is so obvious that it seems almost to speak for itself. Still, Carolyn Cassady, Neal's wife and Jack's lover, offers explanations, including the era's gender roles and the influence of a Catholic upbringing (165-166). But more than that, she represents both men as they often represented themselves: as boys still experimenting with the postures of masculinity. And like many adolescents, they take the macho posturing too far. For whatever reason, though, these two did not grow out of it but remained troubling caricatures of manhood.

Ginsberg's writing also demonstrates an unlikable, immature conception of women as objects, although, in his case, they are objects of repulsion rather than desire. His work features not women, but their bodies, with "the hang of pearplum / fat tissue / I had abhorred" (*Collection Poems* 292). Ginsberg suggests that his open repugnance for female bodies stems not from his homosexuality as some suggest, but from childhood experiences with his often nude and sometimes institutionalized mother, whom he depicts in *Kaddish* as exhibiting herself to him in a sexually suggestive manner (*Collected Poems* 227). My poem, "Tell Me a Story," in which a boy uses masturbation to cope with the personal trauma of one sibling's imprisonment and the other's insanity, contains echoes of young Allen's distress.

Though I portray sexuality, especially concerning women, differently than Ginsberg, I similarly identify myself as a queer poet. Queer sexuality is not an obvious theme in *Wanderlust*, but in some ways, it underpins the autobiographical westward shift that the collection chronicles, beginning with the flight response triggered by the speaker's crush on a female friend

in "Chi Town." The end of the speaker's first serious relationship with a woman, as depicted in "Before I'd Made Up My Mind About Swimming," also indirectly prompts the second geographical transition to New Zealand. In the *Overseas* section, "Shorn" deals most directly with sexual orientation, juxtaposing a childhood haircut that "turned" the young Detroit gay with one her kiwi lover gives her twenty years later. But, in fact, nearly all of that third section, with its focus on a couple's everyday life together – taking photographs, spooning in bed, coping with hangovers – depicts the very happy queer relationship I enjoy with my partner, Jo. Subtler hints of queer subtext also appear in the potentially homoerotic male bonding of "Maverick City Sons" and "Boys on the Beach," as well as in a number of other poems, depending on the assumed gender of the speaker.

And this apparent changeability of the speaker's gender is intentional. As "Shorn" faithfully communicates, I have been ambiguous looking since age four, and I now identify as genderqueer, a fluid and somewhat casual subset of the transgender community. But, whereas "The San Francisco Self-Examiner" plays up the angst of such a designation, the tiresomeness of constantly being scrutinized, I enjoy the flexibility it gives me in my writing. (The reader will note that, for all the complaining in "The San Francisco Self-Examiner" and the claim that "I am ready to spit out this whole / business of ambiguity," the speaker never does reveal their gender [lines 20-21].) I utilize this flexibility in poems like "Maverick City Sons" to fine-tune the dynamics between characters. That poem, for example, is intended as a tribute to the flawed but still charming Kerouac-Cassady friendship, as well as an autobiographical sketch of my first cross-country road trip with Paul. In this case, I felt that a vaguely romantic, though not sexual, relationship between two young males best captured the feel of both complicated friendships.

Five years on from our first big road trip, my friendship with Paul now includes the Beat tradition of literary interplay between poets. My original travel companion and best buddy will soon be completing his own MFA at the University of Virginia. Though I rarely see him now, I still find myself writing with Paul's reactions in mind, and my favorite of his emails are the ones

with poems attached. Paul's work draws more consciously on Language poetry than my own work, but we dwell on similar themes, especially travel. In fact, because we have so much shared experience between us, we sometimes chronicle the same event in two totally different styles. Thus, my "Padiddle," with its narrative-based romantic cruise through downtown Detroit, finds its counterpart in Paul's "The Women Once," a New Sentence style sonnet that begins where "Padiddle" leaves off: "O how the women once drove naked through / The 'Toll-booth, toll-booth!'" leads quickly onto such disparate observations as "Madame once broke waves like china dishes" and "trees are made of paper after all" (Legault, *So Fast* 7). Similarly, my breathless, train-paced love song, "Railroad Rosie," parallels Paul's somber elegy, "Winter Wardrobe," which creeps towards Jay's death in short, conspicuously halting phrases without sacrificing anything in wordplay or double meanings: "You lose only necessary / things, a jack in the deck or a Detroit. / A jay. The word: 'first'. / Your first husband. / You, / Railroad Rosie, you / in the company / of a January approaching" (Legault, "Winter Wardrobe").

Each of us also addresses the other's poetry directly at times. For example, Paul's chapbook, *Unintentional Letter from a Submarine*, depicts a homoerotic undersea voyage in search of Madam Palindrome. The book itself is an exploration of palindromic forms in their natural environment – underwater, where there are no sides (Legault, *Unintentional Letter*). In response to *Unintentional Letter* and to the experience of occupying a Pacific coast opposite to the one I shared with Paul in Los Angeles, I wrote "Boys on the Beach." The sestina's rotation of repeating end words echoes the chapbook's concern with palindromes and the absence of sides, and the two boys, who might be twins or might be lovers, stand in for both the sailors of *Unintentional Letter* and Paul and me.

The celebration of friendship represents a final point of connection between *Wanderlust* and Beat literature. Like the Beats, I regard poetry as a social medium. But for the last year, I was living with my partner in Dunedin, where I lacked both the face-to-face supervision I would have had in Christchurch and the circle of poet friends I left in America, especially Paul. While I do

not think this challenge seriously impaired my writing, it did serve to remind me how central friendship is to my life. And so I made friendship central to *Wanderlust*. Through depictions of my own friends, as well as a few composite characters, I attempt to demonstrate the critical contribution friendship makes to any experience of place or travel. The collection's warmest poems derive their warmth not from the landscapes or the openness of the road, but from loving interactions between travel companions. Likewise, when friends are scarce, as in "Highway 1" or "The San Francisco Self-Examiner," the mood dampens and even travel loses its charm.

Wanderlust, therefore, like the majority of Beat literature, is about people as much as it is about places or the spaces in between. It also a celebration of freedom, certainly. But ultimately, the collection suggests that the most enjoyable freedom is not the freedom of solitude or the freedom to run away, but the freedom you choose to share with friends. After all, a road trip without mates is just driving.

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Wanderlust

By Holly Painter

A ship in port is safe, but that's not what ships are built for.
-Admiral Grace Hopper

The Midwest

And the seed, let it be full with tomorrow.

-Neil Diamond

Detroit,
Elegy for a Hometown

In Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love - they had 500 years of democracy and peace, and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock. So long Holly.

-The Third Man

You're bullied in the fast lane, trampled in the market.
They spring your Wolverine pencilcase, flap it on its hinges
shake out its contents and malcontents, rattle your fired up pistons.

You follow with your eyes the dotted lines as they pirouette neatly away.
Your back's against the wall, against the iridescent river with
five flailing limbs reaching out for fairer friends.

*You first held me in the backseat of an Oldsmobile
arms pinned down, pink blanket wound round
as we followed the salt truck through Southfield.*

Your leader's indicted and cited for perjury, a felony
so the zoo staff will blend his name into the Serengeti sunset
that glubglubglubs your water down from that belly by the freeway

with the motorcar unionist's moniker, a slapdash path that cuts a swath
across your east to west and intersects the capitalist fat cats themselves
your people's midterm gods of repetitive tasks, penance for entrepreneurs.

*From Grandma's porch swing just over the wall
we could hear your lions pace and finally fall asleep
while all the city's mothers called us home to dinner.*

Once a railroad, underground, then overground, a station!
You were made of marble once, Corinthian pillared, vaulted, grand.
In public even, you shined and bathed your citizens in echo.

Now you merely move people, people with chili sauce crusted on their chins
from block to block of coney islands, pit-stops on the pilgrimage
to the cathedral of finance, where once was martyred nothing but leisure.

*You licked my finicky feet with your thick muggy heat
as my old lady baby-sitter rolled me down the street
to a Dairy Queen dinner of hot eats and cool treats.*

You were the arsenal of democracy, the color-blind creator of B-24s
and race-related resentment, a melting pot of simmering tensions.
In the middle of a world war, you held a home-grown riot.

Later you had a revolution. There was a time of national guardsmen, of tanks.
But what did they guard? A gilded age past, passed away long before
any Vietnam vets or displaced cogs crowded the blind pig that Sunday.

*Some weekends we just left you, took our Kroger's bags
to the apple orchards beyond your suburbs or to the
cider mill and ate donuts while we watched the wheel spin.*

When the nation's noble taps ran dry your purple gang stepped in.
And on your neighbor's generosity you simply brimmed with Jazz-age spirit
sipped from outboard motorboats and the backs of black Cadillacs.

You don't drink so much now, but you gamble, just a pocketful of deeds left:
a temple of books, a museum of art, and a pair of ballparks. Card shark
you need a miracle, or better, a renaissance. We hope for better things.

Turn Back Your Clocks

An answer phone retrieves the voice
Ahem, the prodigal babysitter

Hi, this is Jenny. I'm living in Hawaii.

On an empty stomach
Glass-bottom boat
Maui's face flattened to the fishies

Fill in the lines of her face here
House-paint white cupboard canvas

Kneel inside the bedsheets
Mandolin chin, feathered fringe
Bra slapped across the backseat

Was I your minder?

Six days in a psych ward. Stomach-pumped.
Just thought you should know.

You should know everything about me.

I'll turn your clocks forward
And sell back the hours to
Your lakeside castle children

Read off the name here
(Jenny's boyfriend steals home)

Beside the Church

It often rained between the digging and the burying
Afternoons of muddy holes, child-sized swimming pools

We didn't balloon our breath in our cheeks, not after the first time
When we exhaled all in a rush, nothing happened but more rain

We sliced worms with a garden shovel and the dead fell out
But we were small gods – we'd made another worm

We sprawled in new grass, thin tufts in the dirt
And it was like bunk beds

Years later, we made love in the same spot
But the little boy below hadn't grown

The Worm Poem

Potty trained is just flying
Until then, nest and diaper are synonymous
Cotton, tape and whatever twigs baby tosses in
To stay warm, to light a fire

Blind baby bird
Gaping orange gondola
Clamoring holey boat
Rattled by winds that issue rain

Naked hermaphroditic earthworm
Softhard burrowing accordion muscle
Halved to two separate futures
To no fortune

Trade sperm at the swap meet
Shed that dowdy ring
Trade up for another half inch
Trade clothes for the trick of shitting dirt

Radiant sunshower refugee
A girlboy needs galoshes
A hat preheated on the radiator
A light raincoat at least

Gather worms to weave the baptist's blanket
Carry them in pairs for company
Alight gondolier
Regurgitate your sweetest morsel

Tell Me a Story

I'd only been gone for 45 minutes
- not even prison yet,
just far enough down the road
to remember that I'd left
my inhaler in the bathroom
and to turn the whole escort back -

and already my little sister had lost it.
When I walked in
she wolf-whistled real low,
chewed on a sandwich
and commented cheerfully,
"Now there's a sister I can taste!"

My brother had already locked himself
in the bathroom with a magazine
and I could hear him
shouting into the phone
as he unzipped his pants.
"Jared! Jared! Quick - tell me a story!"

And it seemed to me that I could see his cries
written neatly in red pencil
in the back of Mother's recipe book

Oh
Oh
Oh God

Chi Town

The shadow of a head, penumbral with knotted curls
rises again and again against the back of the driver's seat
a childhood of inverted moons fading beneath the bulbs
that stretch a canopy over westbound I-94

I am choked, prostrate, a crumpled marionette
below the sightlines of her mother's rearview mirror
I throb mechanically for the open-mouthed sleeper in front
and plead with the thunderclap God of Mt. Sinai:

Let me not love her

In Chicago, a college tour of icicles, ivy twined towers' wintry stalactites
our shared double bed, hummingbirds penned between quilt squares
She swallows up slumber mid-sentence, breathes whole notes
I wait an hour then slip an arm around her waist, absolved by sleep

But I am not sleeping

I am unfolding a map in my head, uncreasing it on the tray table
Wind up a top with a spiral on its crown, a post-hypnotic spin
Where will it fall on this world with all its wetnesses in blue?

Padiddle

It has come to the attention of the Padiddle Ruling Council that certain hot-blooded youths play a variation of Padiddle where every time a Padiddle is called everyone except the caller must remove an article of clothing. The Padiddle Ruling Council condones such behavior.

-The Encyclopedia of Pointless

Our dawdling Dog Star trails the Eastside thunderstorms
dousing a syrupy dense summer with sheets of relief
floating the last of the fishfly corpses into gutters

and we three peeling specimens of Midwestern mutiny
scuttle into our homegrown hunk of red sexy metal
with a driver side headlight long past its finicky death throes

Bob Seger humming our hometown across the airwaves
and ballcaps slapped on to postpone the inevitable exposure
we muscle along Jefferson Avenue looking for others like us

faded beacons of urban automotive recession and nudity
muted eighties two-tones with lewd, pirate-patched eyes
half-fizzled out machines that offer the excuse to be primitive

The first triumphant hollow thump to the ceiling reveals
back freckles joined by UV rays into reckless rosy rashes
like cookie sheets of ill-spaced egg-runny dough plops

Passing Gabriel Richard Park I stamp the horn in salute
to an accidental false padiddle who extends a "Screw you"
from his motorcycle as I ease off my shoe at the Belle Isle light

Spinning around downtown we slide lower on slippery seats
our kinetic creases streaming chloride heat as we wind up windows
and scatter our polycotton wrappers in naughty laundry piles

A ticklish touch to my knee diverts my next random turn
onto Randolph and in a moment we're sunk into the echoing
fluorescence of the refrigerator-paneled Detroit-Windsor tunnel

With no U-turn possible, we have the width of the Detroit River
in which to force our rakish limbs into sleeves of any kind
before emerging under Canadian clouds beside a Customs booth

The Woodward Dream Cruise

It almost didn't happen that year.

The world's largest voluntary traffic jam was
nearly cancelled, the million plus visitors to the most
celebrated of Grand Circus's five spokes disappointed,
and the classic drag racing strip of the 50s and 60s resigned
to its mundane existence as a smog-clogged artery for

white suburbanites heading to their jobs downtown. What for?

Another grey, cheerless year
in a grey, cheerless town where all signs
suggested that a recession was
very near and the American auto industry on the point
of collapse. We needed the Woodward Dream Cruise, but it almost

didn't happen because on August 16 most
of Detroit was just winning back power from the blackout, which two days before
had snuffed out eight states at a most inconvenient point
in the summer, on one of the sweatiest days of the year.

That oil-dew-scented afternoon with the seatbelts too hot to touch, I was
driving, clipping past the childhood nursery rhyme of familiar street signs

when the radio hiccupped into static and up ahead the traffic signals
winked green to black. Across the northeast, we waited. Most
of us excavated cell phones from purses and pockets, thinking it was
only a downed power line nearby and we'd better call to say we'd be more like four
thirty. We all rang it in together, like some tiresome New Year
and jammed the east coast wireless grids. But at that point

the radio station generators kicked in, singing *Oldies One-Oh-Four-Point-Three*, WOMC, *official sponsor of the 2003 Woodward Dream Cruise* as the DJ signed
back in with a report on the international power outage event of the year.
Back at home, we played Euchre by candlelight, rubbed clean with mostly
melted freezer ice, and didn't open the refrigerator door for
more than a second. And I packed, because after the Dream Cruise, I was

leaving. Forsaking this endearing, powerless mess of a metropolis, I was
going to rim the canyons that gulp down as much space as this too-big sky, point
my hood ornament West, and lay down my dead-end Midwestern life before
the likely mirage of a Californian college guarded by the reverse vasectomy signs
of nearly three thousand miles. I was sticking around for the Cruise that almost
didn't happen. But Detroit flickered back to life and offered its gas-guzzling yearly

tribute to its former self. As I made my final goodbyes, the Motor City was
replaying its golden years, its pastel hot rods and Motown tunes, for bleachers of pointing
children. But I followed the signs to I-696 and left my hometown nostalgia behind, almost.

A Hymn for Durant, Iowa

Oh Durant, oh humble gem of Cedar County
I imagine they hold parades for you
every Mayday and Fourth of July
pipe crackly John Phillip Sousa
through Victrola-shaped speakers
strapped to the last twelve oak trees
that once stood anonymously among thousands
in the cool heart of the deciduous forest
through which your eager sons carved out
a path for their horses and the carriages they pulled

Rather unceremoniously
they called this belt around your middle '5th Street'
At this hour, gluey-eyed waitresses in brown aprons
are serving burned coffee to already-buzzed truckers
off Interstate 80 who can't tell the difference anymore:
"Dorothy sure does make a good cup. Best coffee in the state."

Outside, the school bus grumbles, a pale yellow relic from 1969
on its way (someday) to collect the children in twos and threes
from the grassy corners where they sit spinning maple seeds
like helicopters through the sweet spring air or giggling
at the bland line drawings of the reproductive system
in chapter eight of their 7th grade biology textbooks

But let us be truthful, dear Durant
I do not know you in these daylight hours
I know you only cloaked in deepest night

A careless road-tripper on hour 28 of a cross-country marathon
exhausted, greasy and out of gas
in the middle of 5th Street
in the middle of nowhere
in the middle of America

Friday Nights (in Hooper, Nebraska)

The shopkeepers have all gone home to blue cotton pajamas
and dreams of the honeyed ham to be served at tomorrow's Redeemer picnic
leaving fluorescent lights pulsing in every store window on Main Street
to blind the pressurized teenagers in dull-painted junkers in search of anything
but finding only squirrels left flattened without epitaph on the asphalt.

Overland

There was nowhere to go but everywhere, keep rolling under the stars, generally the Western stars.

-Jack Kerouac

This Country's not an Island

This country's not an island
You can swim here, you can set sail for us but
this is not an island, this is California
and even the small ones know the difference

An island is a place where exotic species
grow much too large because no one can stop them
but this is not America, this is California
Of course there is a difference

Even when we spoon, wrestling in the water
like newborn dolphins with
our fins folded to one side or we kiss
and later claim it was an accident

Even when we warm our limbs together
naked against the other in a sleeping bag
because we're raised on mangos and sunshine
and can't take the cold

Even when we hold hands at the cinema
until our sweaty knuckles slide apart
then clamp back together at a sudden crash
even then we are different

Rain

1. Cork, Ireland

You huddle between navy showers
in a hollow of cathedral limestone
armored in a soap scum film
veined by centuries of this rain

Clouds cruise across the moon as
moths hover over an outhouse bulb
You sip drops from your perch
lips pursed, a dribbling ancient

2. Sarasota, Florida

Transatlantic gusts of African dusts
Saharan sneezes, breezing into the Gulf
scraping through coastal seas and making
old golfers wheeze on Longboat Key

until submarine blooms swallow the plumes
delivered to the Gulf in big gulps of raindrops
and later, lady lunatics will pick at toxic tuna
dished up by the bleeding curls of red tide

3. Los Angeles, California

I see the craggy squiggles and the snow
so close and realize for the first time
that we are a finite city, a patch of
populated desert in a ring of mountains

Tomorrow our guilty haze will drape us again
we'll remember how to drive and
we'll forget the veiled peaks –
we'll believe again that our city is infinite

4. Big River, Saskatchewan

By ride's end, the butterflies are plastered
two-deep, water-glued to the windshield
the bonnet, the wheels – we'll peel off a few
by the wings, but they'll only swing in the wind

So we leave them and in the stories we'll tell
it was a parade float in blossom or a car sprouting feathers
a Gaudi mosaic or a misplaced piñata, a country fair quilt,
a child's letter to God, with a hundred fluttering stamps

A Sestina for Shawn

Brit lit class, and it's James Joyce and his fictional self.
Stephen Dedalus is trying to write a poem, and
so am I. I catch an occasional phrase of the talk
about Dublin and religion, prostitutes and schoolboys
and write an occasional word of my poem, but it's too
hard to concentrate on poetry or Joyce's Irish

flock today, when I have on my mind my own Irish
chum. Well, American really, from Detroit like myself,
but with red hair and blush-ready freckles too.
It's not Stephen but Shawn who wanders into my daydreams and
diverts my attention from my professor, a tubby boy
of a man who stammers more than talks

though even if he could talk
it wouldn't matter today. No literature, British or Irish,
can top my excitement that my best friend, this boy,
is coming tonight. I sit in class and Shawn sits by himself
on a plane that tunnels through Cool Whip clouds and
back to the blue skies that upside-down pave the way to

the West he's never seen. I wonder how he's spending two-
thousand miles of airtime: gaping at window-framed America, perhaps, or talking
to the pious elderly man to his left about the rubbery plane food and
world economics and why such a well-mannered young Irish
Catholic fellow is flying to godless LA. Smiling to himself,
he tells the old gent that he's visiting a girl. "Oh, boy!

Well, isn't that nice?" the man exclaims absently, but the boy's
mind is already elsewhere and now my class is turning to
another story and it's more Joyce: this time a lovesick lad who lets himself
die when his girl moves away and he's left with no one to talk
to, no one to love. I'm listening, but already this poor Irish
chap has become Shawn, someone to love, but so far away, and

it's my fault. I traipsed across the American continent and
left him. But we are not the bereaved girl and the dead boy
of James Joyce's imagination. My goofy-grinned Irish
love lives and comes today to the sun-bleached coast to
see me. My class keeps reading, my professor keeps stutter-talking
and I keep drumming on my desk and humming expectantly to myself.

And high in the sky, a certain Irish boy waits expectantly, too.
Politely engaging his elderly neighbor in idle small talk,
in his mind he hears my drumbeat and hums happily to himself.

Venice

Inside is just an anywhere anyday Holiday Inn with the danish breakfast buffet for anyone who can amble past the monkey-capped concierge like they have a right to be there in their bermuda shorts and tourist trap tees or a barefoot kwik-e mart with a sliding coldrush trunk of sticky-sleeve popsicles and everything else only two-deep shelved by the chemical-grime-punctured monarch of the checkout who'll sell beer for double food stamps but only between noon and one after his bicep-bloated boss sneaks two squirts each from the self-tan bottles in aisle three and swaggers out to Muscle Beach, that iron mesh fishbowl of drip-knotted chest hair and squiggle-veined grunting no-necks in sleek Speedos, breaking on benches beside the miniaturized tennis courts where gaggles of college girls smack their rackets in time with the elastic thumps of Monday night drum circle with its droning hashish musk and four hour dusk crescendo creeping under the catcalls of teenage taggers high on the Technicolor twists of their own names and taunting a pair of squatter guys, unwise to our belted smileys and pocketed fists clenching and unclenching like the Pacific, pulled up close to spit out some blond boys in midwinter wetsuits with their surfboards tucked underarm like the asymmetrical seagulls sifting through Styrofoam trash for scraps of carnival food discarded by boardwalkers gawking at a sword-swallowing skater or the scaly sand dragon re-sculpted daily with shovel and spoon by a bronze-tanned man who begins before the first podcast-strapped jogger bounces by, before the caricature artists arrive with their wobbly tabletop shops, before the beach police megaphone sounds its good morning and we wake between volleyball nets where the beach-sweeper doesn't go.

Sonoran Song

Saguaro, gloating eight-headed phantom
Of midnight coronations when the dust can't be seen
Prickled crowns, no, blossoms so white they're invisible

Kill the lights
Don't forget how shy you were once

Give me your hand
A worried fingernail is the miner's pickaxe
Crinkle a new mountain against the wind

It's easy to remember when there's nothing to see
But fasten your eyes anyway

A rib is not a seed for a smaller subspecies
It is here, it flanks my heart, it is the C# plank
On the glockenspiel

What dry lonesome wind carries the desert's sermon
Sand that never finds a home

Listen, the coyote wails
Will we all sing for our suppers?
Deluge my cupped palm beggar's bowl

Quieter inside
Thirsty whale ribs
Swallow me

Maverick City Sons

We abandon that vertical seasalt Legoland at rush hour, May tenth, five p.m.
Pacific Standard Time in a honking, steaming, close-cuddling procession of
backlit raindrops trickling along too few finite rivulets. Foot brake-bound,
I jabber and you nod, flit to another radio station and train your camera
to the top of the Aon building – zoom, scan, pull back, looking for jumpers.
None today, but you keep skimming. US Bank, Wells Fargo.
No, everyone today is happy with his job, with his life.

We lose our tagalong convoy within the hour and then there's just space and
we can't figure out why LA's so crowded when there's nothing
from here to Nevada but Joshua Trees and those crisp white windmills
they thought would ruin the view but the view is just mountain crusts growing mold.
The Baker thermometer at the Gateway to Death Valley reads 97 degrees and
we have only these clothes to sweat through so we gulp down our 7-Ups and diesel
and you conduct us across the state line, past the involuntary Zyzzyx! (gesundheit)
and now my eyes dust over and I catch a Las Vegas outpost, solitary rollercoaster
in the desert, like a tin can rattler poised to spring at any twitch in this uncanny silence,
but I miss the real thing and when I wake, you assure me that it wasn't real, just the
accumulated bric-a-brac of some undiscerning international junk shop.

After the folded corner of Arizona, it's Utah, a seven-layer Mormon Sunday potluck cake
of faded pink and red and purple and we suspect it's exquisite but it's two a.m. and we can
only tell the mountains from the sky because they are so much blacker and firmer
than the backcountry firmament with its borers and pores to ease out the pressure of
all that light. At the Browse Canyon exit, we stop to take pictures of all those gleaming
jimmies but your camera is Tokyo-born and will not believe in this impossible proliferation.
So we leave the heavens heaped on the invisible crags of Utah and I trundle us through
to morning, trailing the city-on-a-hill brake lights of some Jesus Loves You truck in the
right lane as we sidewind up the Rocky Mountain foothills while your limp lips dribble
spittle in the corner, snoring like a metronome. Now I'm chirping along on a Kool-Aid
sugar high to this keyed-up Kinks album excavated from the glove box because the sun's on its
way and I'm yawning mightily but your eyelids twitch with darting dreams, and I let you sleep.

So when the sky bleaches pink like a white load harboring a stowaway red sock, so does
the snow, the snow because we're a mile up in a flotilla of ragged fog passing great conical
conifers and chalets with vanilla-frosted roofs like the cast-off bunny hills of some crumbling
resort town. When those distant due-east peaks finally release their incandescent charge,
we're on a cliffside orbit down, down on a quartet of whiny rotors and I have to mash my
eyelashes fast to filter out the fresh fluorescence of the slopes. But the picture postcard's
slipping from view as my traitorous body intones, Sing me to sleep, oh No Name of the
sluice-sliced canyon! Sing of greedy Grizzly Creek conspiring with the altitude to siphon
oxygen from my veins! Sing of Hanging Lake, hanging like these lead-laden lids over my sun-
seared eyes! Sing, you varicosed matriarchs of the mountains just the echo of a lullaby.
Design for me an elegy, a triple-metered melody in some somnolent minor key . . .

Durr-rut-drut-drut-durr-rut-drut-drut – I'm walloped wide awake by a singing shoulder mere meters past the Bair Ranch exit (next exit Edwards - 31 miles), as you rebirth yourself through the epic squirms of a lengthy lanky-boy yawn. And it's morning now that you've risen, your eyes sapphire blue baking, taking in this scene stolen from the lid of a certain swiss cocoa tin turned loose tea receptacle in my grandmother's yellow doiled pantry. You offer to drive, Sir Gallant Squint-Eyes, but the shoulder's just a yard of ice and judder bars so we wind down the windows, slip in the Stones, and for thirty-one meandering miles, we warble along like a jubilant cacophony of field-tripping third graders on an acoustics-cursed bus until finally we make our exit at Edwards and I scurry straight for the Shell station and straighten up the gas gauge. Easing into a car lot slot beside the new-mown, dew-soaked lawn, we uncoil and unzip the waterproof, tundra-proof army sleeping bag from the trunk and drape its downy embrace over the slick juicy grass where we twine our tired bodies together.

Breathe in the lulling chill of this north-country air, you maverick city sons, you intrepid smooth-snoring blood brothers, you tongue-less lovers of the west. Breathe in the wet whispering of white-fisted firs, the somnific syrup of the sun-flecked sky, the glistening highland particles of cosmic ice dust. Breathe in, my boys, and sleep.

Before I'd Made Up My Mind About Swimming

Some days after she'd shattered my heart into that species of tiny sharp shards that mothers everywhere are forever cleaning up with damp dishcloths in thick-soled shoes while the children get OUT OF MY KITCHEN! I came around to her fourth floor hotel room with a wee kitten we'd christened Copernicus, smuggled up the elevator snug in the front pocket of my hoodie.

She couldn't fail to love him and, by extension, me, so I poured my squirmy surprise into the bowl of her palms. She gently squeezed the minute ribs vibrated by his inhalations, then set him down to scurry through tunnels of boxes and homeless objects, chased sideways by her skulking hand.

Her window slid open nine inches and overlooked the pool. I stood parallel to a muggy August. Such terrifying itches were my impulses, more treacherous than most, because I knew that I didn't want to die but that I might jump all the same just as I always cannonballed into pools before I'd made up my mind about swimming.

Is there a record of airborne regrets?

Of children hovering, flapping their slender wrists to rewind over the placid surface tension of swimming holes? Of skydivers gripping their guts as zero-gravity tugs kiddy shrieks hand over hand from their throats? Of jumpers clawing at the sky when they realize, whizzing past floor thirty-seven, that this minute is penultimate to nothing, that they'll never tell this story?

Railroad Rosie
for Lil' Jay

Catch it as it curves on the tracks in the yard toss your bag here's a hand
and up!

Railroad Rosie, my hobolove
He's your hobolove, Lil' Jay

Five foot ten plus vertical stripes, too tall overall, soot stained overalls
a conductor's suit and floss-stitched boots, a conductor's wife in another life
Three times detoxed, he's your wine-in-a-box, freight-line envoy
straight ex-con boy, conduct him across state lines

Railroad Rosie, my hobolove
He's your hobolove, Lil' Jay

Facial tats and matted dreads, he's got runaway charm, in October you're wed
and you honeymoon to your own happy tune, cracklin' Rose in a bridal pose
Dusky wining, alfresco dining, and all the while to Frisco winding on
UP trains, yellow armour dressed, main-line veins to the warmer west

G'night Railroad Rosie, my hobolove
Sleep tight hobolove, Lil' Jay

The way it felt to be so warm

I.

Three days and nights in the smoky gales of autumn, you stood there
with one cracked crooked leg wedged tight between splintered posts.
Three days, but you only whimpered politely, with meekest restraint:
Please Sir and If you're not too busy and Is anyone at home?

Three days, as you languished, an innocent shamed in the stocks,
we paced every last paddock, but when we finally found you,
you appeared at first to be posing, a creature so eager to please that
you'd be poised on tiptoe for some classical pastoral portrait.

As we wrenched free your fractured hoof, you trembled,
a shivering core of wet matted misery, moaning in feeble protest
against the dull dew of the morning. And then, with a panicked bleat,
you stumbled, tumbled, skidded fast down the grass, slid thrashing,
crashing past the spring saplings, landing with a splash in the gully.

II.

And you remember the blue lights of the dancehall on the beach of your Lake Huron hometown;
and you remember dozing on the screened-in front porch in the worm-scented rains of April;
and you remember the sawdust on your boots as your dad showed you how to use his handsaw;
and you remember your mother helping you into your snowpants and coat and backpack;
and the way it felt to be so warm and bundled made you sure you'd grow up to be an astronaut;
but now you realize you're just another sheep and you're dying.

III.

When we reach you in the ditch, you twitch at my touch
and someone sighs, Curtains, but I know your eyes are alive,
so four of us scrawny things wrap your sagging frame in a blanket
and drag you back up the hill, filling our gumboots with fresh mud.

At the doorstep, I wrest you from that filthy sheet, carry you in to our bed,
and sink us both into the welcoming warmth while you nestle your grazing head on my chest.
As I stroke the soft tufts preserved under crusts of muck
you notice how my heartbeat changes when I swallow
but sleep comes to you before you can tell me.

Tiny taxicab plane over the lush wrinkles of the Santa Lucias, cruising high
chomping on pretzels that taste of heartburn, scratching shapes in dull ballpoint
on elastic skin beneath the blonde knee fuzz through a hole
gashed in my jeans. Nervous flier on this bouncy hour-long leap to
Los Angeles, I lurch forward as the seatbelt light flicks on but it's not clear
what the trouble is. The sky's a bottomless blue and there's nothing

out there but the churning waves that chew the coast far below, a frothing
shelf of wriggling sealife that is still and silent from this height.
The sight of my grave eyes and number three widow's peak in the clear
glass of the window unnerves me and I try to look beyond to a point
outside but the Gestalt switch is flipped and I can't return to
the single exposure of a calm California sea without seeing the whole

picture: the beautiful hunted look of androgyny, holed
up in this pressurized pocket of sky, foreground to that still prettier thing –
the relief at the end of a continent, that American edge I fled to
years ago in a crumbling camper van, trickling down the Pacific Coast Highway
taking self-portraits, the camera an arm's length away, at every lookout point,
embracing my own mystery, cultivating the uncertainty behind those clear

eager eyes, so that now, as I sit in this rattling airborne tub, even less is clear
than it was then. Solemn children blink at me and I am ready to spit out this whole
business of ambiguity: the burly man and woman who guard each departure point
arguing over whose bewildered wand should strip-search me because anything
this freakish is unlucky. Enigmas are unwelcome on airplanes. I might be a hi-
jacker, a Taliban sleeper cell operative. And there's a good chance I'm lonely, too.

But who isn't, who wanders inland from the sea? Like a lazy bicycle, to
follow west we must first teeter east, circling South-Central until we're cleared
to rumble low over the Inglewood grid. We forsake the weak oxygen of higher
altitudes for a mantle of lethal yellow silk that makes the whole
city skyline seem an antique replica, a sepia photograph, something
exhibited at LACMA centuries and civilizations on from the point

of its origin. Our Virgin ship sinks into the rancid metropolis and there's a point
when the great wheels flounce onto the tarmac before rolling along to Terminal Two.
Baggage carts scurry across my ancient asphalt face. Passengers wheel carry-on things
from the cavernous overhead compartments. When the cabin is clear
I sidle into the aisle like February's first groundhog. Emerging from my hole
I am spooked by my own shadow, by the spectators scrutinizing me from on high.

But such things are only ghosts, gussied up in translucent frills to sneer and point
as I step out under the high smudged sun of this outmoded desert, turning west to
breathe the sea air beneath all this smog, an undercurrent clear and holy.

In Which We Depart

A gangplank peddler sold raffle tickets for the lifeboats.
At least they're realists, I thought, and bought four.
His mutt had more limbs than he could manage and
followed at five paces. He beats him, I know, but what?

Hoopskirts twist sideways to bustle through doorways
and beau brummells tip their caps and tap their canes
over the hollow where vegetarian gladiators guide us
through a reenactment of the battle on our boarding passes.

Chinatown arrives at the docks and puts us down for
six pairs of tube socks and some turtles we'll keep as pets
while Mother winds up and pitches me oranges for the scurvy.
But I'd rather be a popular wench with citric breasts in my blouse.

We're waving now and the city pulls back, repulsed at our emotion.
So we scrape out the deck chairs and read our mills and boon
until the cabin boys cluster around with nightcaps and quilts
and I curl up with Mother's oranges pressed to my chest.

When you tire of your homeland

Gather up one corner
and simply start walking away

Saunter through a neighboring autumn
Drag your native land over leaves
red and yellow like flattened peaches

Stretch your home spaghetti-thin
But careful! Not so fast!

When it becomes impractical
to tow your old life any farther
make your way to the national gallery

There find the painting with a thousand snaking rivers
and thread your country up to the oily horizon

Overseas

When you see the Southern Cross for the first time, you understand now why you came this way.
-Crosby, Stills, and Nash

Highway 1

Tar syrup congeals in a hedgerow's musky shade as I sculpt
bottle shards and swollen cigarette butts between peeling heels
A Sunday parade glides by: flushed mothers whose car-seated
passengers wail at the Tip-Top sign rattling behind them in the wind

tobacco-crusteds teens who pick at mutton-birds with plastic forks
honeymooners who flash wedding rings apologetically as they pass
and the hunched-over biddies with earlobes dangling to their shoulders
who feed me condensed pavlova in Tupperware tubs marked Jim

Snail's house, koru sleeping bag bouncing behind my knees
for drizzly-beam churchyards that squeak of rodent runners
The elderly cluck at me, sway close to say it's not safe anymore
but she's gone, and I don't give a toss about anything but

this left Antipodean beggar thumb with its simpering question
to the plum sky leaking around a weathervane's famished ribs
and the motorway's patron moon whose airy understudy has
sullenly bleached its spot all afternoon: *Who will come for me now?*

His Blue Moons

I.

He comes at last after months of paralyzing drought
of shepherd boys drinking the dew of the fields
of wildebeests sharing the water holes of lions

He comes at last with the rains from the north
the flash floods, the urchins who take to the treetops like kites
the delicate monkeys who can neither swim nor drown

He comes at last in the disquieting chill of an antique moon
sallow but for china blue hairline fractures around the eyes
and wrestles a pocket button for the last dry cigarette

I sigh, I see you're still trying to kill yourself

II.

And you, he says caustically, but casually
tossing his breath downwind where
sea breezes cast away the toxin

Then he sniggers, as a ghost horse troubled by a real fly
and offers his empty hand as we sidestep a May blue moon
that shivers in the puddles between railroad tracks

III.

The full moon is an empty cup at afternoon tea
when Nana leaves the kettle bawling on the stove

His slender fingers scissor between mine
and the dance he drags from our feet
one two three one two three one two threes
us past the glow of whitewashed warehouses

across the spindly bridge where children watch cars
burn red time lapse streaks in the vast alleys below
beyond the sagging marquees of an autumn fairground
where the silhouettes of stiltmen gather fog in the meadow

up the rasping steps of a late century fire escape
to the cool porcelain garden atop a red brick roof
where we pause to breathe in the sky that separates us
still from the moon

Angelino in Dunedin

In the July frosts my breath billows in the kitchen as I dawdle through the dishes
the sink just a hot bath for my hands before heading out with an icy skid on
barely WOF-ed tyres to avoid the scamper of a creaturely shadow that's just
a clankity rolling beer can not to mention the trolleys disastrously deserted
on Cumberland by drunken munters on a New World run between couch-fires
while the drink-drive wagon up Great King breathalyses my name and address
under a blackness thick like saturated ink quite unlike an LA sky with its green-pink
midnight never conjured before the downtown lights drained out the desert darkness.

When the gales of Northeast Valley give up shaking my drafty villa flat with earthquake
aftershocks that rouse me through the night and pitch our rubbish into the waters of Leith
and the spring thaw finally finds the South, I strip off my grimy thermal leggings and
reacquaint my pale shaggy knees with the cool roughness of denim jeans pulled on before
a V-fueled cram session at the library with some mates who perpetually tag-team
close reserve textbooks they never purchased from the bookstore but skim through furiously
for two days before sitting the exam and then bugger off to the Refuel Halloween gig in
fluorescent outfits nearly as skimpy as the extravagant costumes draped over goosepimply
gay nudity at the all-night Halloween Carnival on Santa Monica Boulevard.

When Orion turns precarious cartwheels one-handed across the northern summer sky
the students scurry home to menial holiday jobs, Christmas barbeques with Nana and Granddad
and evenings glazed over at a certain automated hospital soap populated by a rotation
of the nation's top talent on their way overseas, a scrubbed stale half hour punctuated
by pseudo-scientific dental diagrams in bubbly toothpaste ads recycled once monthly
while on a Wednesday evening stroll from the Octagon to Uni I meet no one
but the twelve teenage boys playing touch in the middle of the vacant intersection
at George and St. Andrew scattering for boy racers only once or twice an hour.

In the Gardens' dappled autumn shade, I perch on a bench with a barcoded book
while my U-lockless bicycle leans against the gothic iron gate near the lawn where a
hunting party of sputtering ducks surrounds picnickers and hydrangea bushes bloom
funny beta fish flowers, nature's pH paper: neutral pink and cold acid blue
like the pure South Pacific of St. Kilda Beach where no gleaming musclemen
or gold-painted entrepreneurs throng the sand but only two boys, a dog, and a Frisbee
blot the picture postcard view and the water's freshly melted from an iceberg
positioned offshore where there ought to be at least a couple of oil rigs stalking
the horizon and spitting black tar to be peeled off the soles of your feet.

We Get On

Like a house on fire. What a line. Nothing burns here.
Even my armpits grow mildew while I sleep and
stick insects weld spindly watertight armor for storms.

A fistful of stars spattered at this latitude night after night
always the same, just tilted, and you picnic alone on
a grass island between eastbound and westbound.

I skid up close, toss tins of corn out the window.
What's your sign? Where's your beggar's caption?
Take a photograph to hang in my kitchen. You cook.

Feed me oysters. I'm allergic to ragweed and shellfish
but what an aphrodisiac, to watch you shuck and pile
the soft parts in a shallow pool of shallot vinegar.

I let you out in spring to press your low nipples flat
against a sled on a dewy hill. It's faster than snow
and a salt truck sprays the ice-sculpted children.

I paint a pot of daffodils for your desk and put you to work
writing the story of my life, especially the part where
you sit on my bike and put your thumbs through the holes
in my pockets.

Otago

If the Central Railway remained, we'd have wheezed Vulcan diesel
for 236 kilometers past cement platforms sunk in gravel chalk:
a procession of towns, timing our thoughts to the clickety-clack.

But too late for railcars, we roamed motorways in my mum's Mazda
listening to the Nat King Cole tracks that didn't yet skip
and tracing Dr. Frankenstein's stitches in the mountainsides.

We picnicked on crumbling blue cheese boulders in
salads of scorched grass and scrubbed homophobic scrawl from
the bungee jump bridges that attract ambivalent suicides.

Sometimes we stopped to inhale those inland easterlies
added a touch of tobacco, and breathed toxin at the gorse
spilling over nearby hills like a stubborn mustard stain.

We held strategy meetings in the rickety gold shanties that
pockmarked the ravines, fastening our maps flat and unscrolled
with century-old candleholders of crumbling green copper.

We watched ewes forage in the tussock, the searching shapes
just a slightly lighter shade of lint, and in the distance the ranges
piqued a need for hot cinnamon buns smothered in fast melting sugar.

We're meant to flock to coasts, to big cities with liberal leanings.
We're not expected to nest atop tire piles or to perform quaint
mating rituals under weeping willows with windswept hair.

But in six months we fell in love and the place was inextricable.

Jo's Teeth

They're crooked. Not like the politicians my father harangues over Easter ham. More like the zigs, not to mention the zags, of the concrete seawall on which I wobbled as a child, fingertips outstretched for balance, one hand over the thumping waves, the other hovering safely over land.

They're jammed. Not like fruit rolling boiled til the sugar charms the pectin, or my mangy brother in the garage with amps and guitars. Jammed like the fourteen lanes of the Santa Monica Freeway on any old afternoon, miles of mechanized fires adding another 10 degrees to the year-round summer swelter.

They're spooning. Not like my mother doling out green beans. Spooning like we do in the night, falling asleep on opposite sides of our double bed and waking to find that she's cornered me against the outside edge, in the gentle grip of her legs and warm in her arms.

The day will be beautiful

My knuckles itch and I wonder if you've been tested lately
if you parallel park correctly, in only three swipes
if you would know how many times to thump my sternum
and how to seal my mouth completely with yours

The day will be beautiful and it will be my duty to notice

Your father posts us baggies of knotted walnuts
already freed from their round wooden cells
We stay in bed all afternoon and don't go out
until the hailstones stop plopping on our roof

The day was not beautiful but I didn't notice

One night, a toothpick alloy bridge straddled the tracks
and was oranger than anything else on the island
We took pictures because we were together
while the streetlights jiggled like we couldn't keep still

Shorn

I. Detroit, Michigan

Yellow Christmas bulb sunk shallow in the snow
the halo of the spring sun yields hardly a hint of heat
and yet my Michelin Man Buddha brother leaps shrieking
through the tsk-tsk-tsk of the sprinkler stream
as it swirls around, an ill-oiled helicopter of water.

Spraying the window with prune-fingered hands
he mimes for my attention but I am caged indoors
stuck in the shrill sludge of my parents' argument:

There are creepy-crawlies in my hair
stowaways from a shared hairbrush
in the locker room of the rec center pool
where I blow bubbles and nearly drown
every Tuesday in my dolphin-level beginners class.

A lethal shampoo will purge them.
Lather, rinse, repeat and I can return to preschool.
Except, *Our girl's got so much hair.*

And so animal chunks float sullen to the floor.
I start to whimper and years from now
my mother will decide
that this was what turned me gay.

II. Dunedin, New Zealand

Drag ragged fingernails through a rubbish bag
and a tea towel for my neck. I'm set. We kiss.
Icy blades graze my scalp and slice ringlets
thick and curly
ever since puberty spat out the revised me.

What's left, an overloved teddy bear, threadbare and patchy.

Then clippers massage my head
and cascades of tiny whiskers descend.
American pasty-face in the mirror
androgynous Samson, scalped but smiling.

Tonight, searching, grasping for curls
her fingers will find only naked ears.
Gender is lost, has been lost since age four
but not sex, no, not sex.

Saturday Morning

Northeast Valley cups an aching blue morning
but my brain is still bathed in pear Absolut
a superficial sedative until late afternoon if not
for the constipated lawnmower blustering of
the unlicensed amateur boyracer straining a
dingy farmbike from corner dairy to dead end
and back again endlessly along our anointed street
while behind him some pre-pubescent limpet
presumably half-deaf squeals and clutches
his fraying beater between her fingers.

I struggle to lift my liquor-laden head from its
pod of pillows nearly piercing myself on
a particularly prickly feather venturing an escape
and begin to bemoan the neighborhood
hicks with all the theatrical hatred of a
bleary grizzly bear awakened mid-season from
her hibernation when from beside me the
patron saint of hangovers silences my tirade
with her hand over my mouth followed by a
bottle of water which I guzzle with gusto.

My shrunken cerebrum irrigated I exhale
into the wintry indoors a cirrus bedroom canopy
a thinning silver plume from parched radiator-
cracked nostrils that expand like new pumped
butterfly wings to sniff at my own spirited
gastric emissions unloaded nocturnally under
the bedcovers and now vigorously flapped out
with an accompaniment of dramatic coughing
that punctuates the clankity crescendo
as the cursed motorbike scuttles back this way.

When we've recirculated the poisoned air supply
like fidgety primary school children made to play
cooperative non-competitive parachute games
during indoor interval we turn our backs to the two
wheeler's tattered hum and the gravel grating in the
dustpan of a neighborhood watch woman on a
Sisyphean street-sweeping mission and she wraps
her longer limbs around my fetal beetle ball
breathing softly on my neck as we defect from the
waking world to a warmer one of conjoined dreaming.

Canterbury Plains

The wheat's a freeze frame of beige rain
Quivering above the drive, improbably vertical
Terrestrial tassels strung up by an invisible thread
Stretched a hundred million miles to the hydrogen
Gaslamp drifting overhead behind a slow loping
Pilgrimage of chastely white clouds

I swagger below, the American farmboy I never was
In a chest level canopy of Queen Anne's lace
Or Queen Anne's snowflakes, perhaps
Something fractal, like the ferns further upcountry
Curled up green comb-racks for comb-racks
For combs

The highland cattle in shaggy summer misery
Frame me in their trapezoidal horns, a trespasser
Launching into friendly kiwi airspace a foreign missile:
A red, white, and scuffed, cork and leather piece of home
A Rawlings baseball, falling in tight geometry to
The spanksound pocket of my glove

The donkeys notice me, and look up quizzically
Like grey uniformed generals awaiting bad news
Ferdinand and Francesca leave their rusty tent
Their hairy, corrugated scratching post and
Flick forward their ears, thick and steady as my forearm
And hot under my fingernails

Southpaw sandwiched in cowhide, I walk back
Clapping the ball with its smudges of donkey dust
Pitching it high in a sky where it doesn't belong
Though it looks just the same, a fat little bird
Darting for a darker blue, a grander view
Its underbelly in shadow

Telephones

I like cars more than telephones

Your voice in my ear makes me feel so alone

-The Arcade Fire

You live in a Motown snowglobe
a January whiteout
a ballet of bobbing traffic lights

I have an unnatural summer birthday
on an expanse of volcanic sand
beside the Tasman Sea

You search out sharper details
he's afraid of daddy long legs
and he smells like melted ice

I have new words that don't reach you
lollies and gumboots and one for the way
the sun leaps up all at once, sheepish

You will be married on an island
of forgotten fish bowls
with wild deer for witnesses

I would wait in the woods in my red sea rig
but red ribboned trees only worry about
the tomorrow that cuts us off

When you hear my voice but can't taste my breath
It's not 'death do us part'
It's just these telephones

Boys on the Beach
for Paul

Five hours in a gutless summer wonder like a Boys'
Brigade bus parading us north as we bitch
about the sticky-black leather back seat, treacle-thick heat
lazy fly fizzing, concussing on the glass, herds
of cattle startled, grazing in the grass, rheumy eyes see
us onward, heaving past banks draped daintily in

darker green, radiata pines with chewed up trim, interim
toothpick piles, onward, to gapped smiles from local boys
GO sign-twirlers in roadworks crews, onward, cruising out to sea
that salt-soup sloshing flat, washing in at Coopers Beach
where nighttime nudes, post-coitally subdued, can hear
the dogged ache of foreign waves collapsing without heed

for our clingfilm summer, humidity stew, my heartbeat pulsing heat
and I know it's this hair, Greek boy statue ring of curls, cool in
museum marble, maybe, but not in Greece and not here
in the flesh, dribbled sweat double vision blur: bronze boys
in a sandstorm kaleidoscope, slick symmetry down the beach
on a brace of boogie boards, Styrofoam smack against the sea.

Floating palaces, moon moored chariots for suntanned sultans, seen
here in foam-sewn ruffles like the leaders of the first gasping heat
of dusky demigods to reach us from some South American beach
where our Chilean doubles, Pacific palindromes, spoon, innocent
in the surf, wrapped tight like salty cocoons, then climb atop buoys
for a westward squint to the scouts they sent to find us out here

alone but twin-hearted already, underwater and yet able to hear
the plunging gurgles of the other. A single surge sets off the scene:
the Grecian boatman tumbles, sand-scraped, jumbled, just a boy
child of crepe paper lungs drugged by the heat
of the midday sun, dragged under, deadly thunder inundating
my ears until I'm grabbed up and lugged onto the beach

a bit limp at first, limbs slack, neck flaccid like the beached
baby hammerheads fisherman sometimes find here
staring down Pōhutukawa pipecleaners dusting the shore, inert
with wide-eyed horror only two meters short of the breathable sea
low-cut tidal tease, the ragged blue I now cough free, clumsy heat
tarting up my cheeks as I lean into the numbness of a boy

flecked with ocean grit and breathing still in squalls, beach
towel drawn around our skinnyboy shoulders, a hero
against the battering sea, he holds me to his chest, despite the heat.

King-East Revisited

Chain link shadow cats, night cawing roosters
pale mournful babies of quiet Latino ladies
wild dogs dragging piñatas down sidewalks
ghettobirds dip diving, bellies full of cops

A squirrel! The first time you point and squeal
Not even a tourist – a hermit, maybe, and then
the buildings, you kink your neck around, or
the sea, was the foam always coffee brown?

Roadside fire sale: Happy Meal plastic gadgets
Catholic school polo three cousins worn
bedsheets wreathed together by rain and dust
shopping cart, my own shopping cart, mine

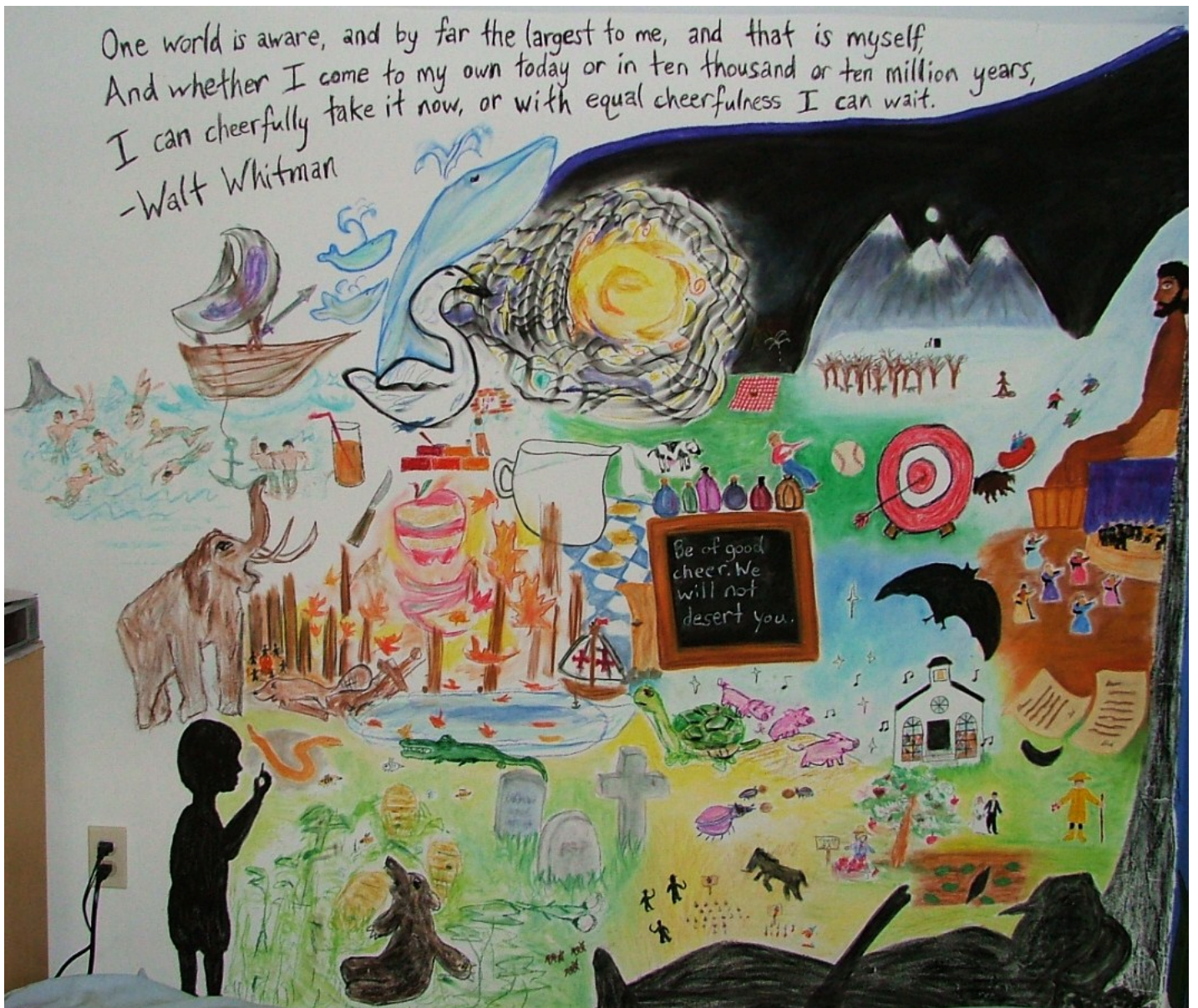
Dimes clack in pockets, tiddlywinks now this
is the Monopoly money, you're slow to follow
The Dash stops on the wrong side and you're
going the wrong way around, below downtown

Mechanics' shoes scuff stuffed pews on the
front lawn at Friendship Primitive Baptist Church
An ice cream truck squeaks La Cucaracha and
it's Tamale! Tamale! Tamale! every morning

Musica norteña wake up, mulitas on the breeze
As the blurry-dull sun hovers upside down over
King-East, you find your Spanish dubbed out of sync
like everything else you think you remember

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor John, first of all, for his advice, encouragement, and unwavering confidence, especially in the home stretch (to use an Americanism). I am also grateful to my proofreaders, Al, Emily, Rachel, and Sarah, for so much brilliance on such short notice. Thank you to my family for loving and supporting me even while I am far away. Thank you also to the Macdonald family for all the support, especially the use of the bach while writing my essay. Thank you Paul for years of adventures to fill this book. And as always, thank you Jo for being my partner, my morale-booster, and my first reader for every poem. I could not have finished this thesis without your patience and love. Finally, thank you to the Beats for teaching me to wander.



"Song of Myself" by Holly Painter and Paul Legault. Los Angeles, CA 2005.